

A BROKEN LILY



MRS MORTIMER COLLINS

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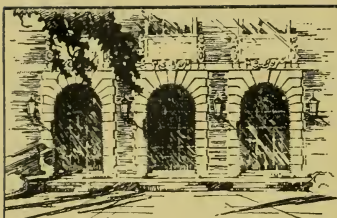
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A BROKEN LILY.

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VOL. II.

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A BROKEN LILY

BY

MRS. MORTIMER COLLINS

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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A BROKEN LILY.

CHAPTER I.

MISS MEADOWS had for a long time been accustomed to dine late with her father and mother. The Squire said that it could not hurt a fast-growing girl to have a little wholesome food in the evening; but he was probably in the first instance actuated by the selfish desire of having the child at table to prevent his sitting down alone with his wife.

On the evening of her birthday she dressed and went down to the drawing-

room with her customary feeling of dread at meeting her mother. She went into the room nervously, but no one was there. The parson soon appeared, and just before the second bell rang the Squire came in, but Mrs. Meadows was still absent, a very unusual thing for her. The second bell rang, but they made no move to go to the dining-room. Presently the lady's-maid appeared with a message.

“If you please, Sir, my lady's not very well, and begs to be excused.”

This was a very unusual occurrence. Mrs. Meadows seemed generally to be in health, but if she did suffer from some slight ailment she never allowed it to keep her away from her place at table. It was part of her policy to assert her position as much as possible, and she would rather suffer the severest of headaches all through dinner than leave her

husband and daughter to gain any ascendancy in her absence. She knew that she was hated, and that her presence caused irritation, and she took a delight in sitting at table opposite her husband with that eternal bland smile, and those gracious manners, and that dove-like voice, as if she were the happiest woman in the world.

The three inmates of the drawing-room looked at one another in astonishment as the maid left the room. There was a nervous smile on each face as if the first thought had been one of relief. Even the parson, with that extra share of Christian grace with which Keziah credited him, let his human nature get the upper hand for a moment, and looked rather glad than otherwise. But Pet was suddenly seized with a remembrance of a previous occasion when illness on the part of her mother was

made a mode of punishment to herself and her father.

“Oh, papa, dear!” she said, “perhaps she’s angry with us for not including her in our holiday.”

“I don’t see how that can be. She’s seen no less of us except at lunch, and we have often gone out to lunch together to the Wests and Bonsors and others.”

“But perhaps she thought as I had a holiday that I ought to have driven out with her.”

“Nonsense, child! Let’s come in, the soup will be getting cold.”

The little party were certainly happier without Mrs. Meadows, but still they were not entirely at ease. The *bête noire* of a household (there is no English term for it) has great power. He can sometimes tyrannise as much by his absence as his presence. His absence

often means that he is annoyed with you and means to punish you, and that you can prepare yourself for punishment accordingly.

This was what Pet felt with regard to her mother. She had thoroughly enjoyed the day, and now she began to have a guilty feeling that she ought not to have enjoyed it so much. She wondered what she could have done to offend, and dreaded what she might have to go through the next morning at breakfast, and indeed for several days perhaps. The next day was Saturday, and there would be that dreadful drive, when her mother took the opportunity of saying all sorts of things which she dared not say before the Squire.

When the three were alone at dessert the Squire rallied Pet on looking so miserable. She again expressed her fears of having given offence.

“Come,” he said, “I’ll send a message up and try and find out the real state of the case. Perhaps she’s really bad.”

The butler was called and ordered to give a message to the lady’s-maid, that the Squire sent his compliments and would be glad to know if the mistress was very ill, and could he do anything for her.

The maid herself presently came into the dining-room.

“If you please, Sir,” she said, “my mistress would be glad to speak with you before you retire for the night.”

“Very well, I will go to her room presently,” said the Squire.

All three looked at one another in greater wonderment than ever now. Thornton Meadows was certainly not accustomed to be summoned to his wife’s room.

After this there was an unsettled feeling amongst them. They made all sorts of guesses and speculations as to what was the matter, but none of them came near the truth. The Squire was uneasy. He wanted the interview over. At last he got up and said to his cousin :

“ Don’t let me hurry you away, Bart. Stay and look after Pet, I daresay I shall be back again soon ;” and he left the room.

The parson waited some time, but neither he nor Pet was in good spirits ; and he said he thought he had better go home, and Pet would be better in bed. The child went to bed, feeling that her birthday had ended miserably ; for she still dreaded her mother’s displeasure.

It was some time before she could get to sleep. She kept listening for her

father to pass her door, as he would have to do in leaving her mother's room. But she heard no sound, and came to the conclusion that he must have gone back some time before, and was probably in his own room.

The excitement produced by Mrs. Meadows's absence had caused the incident of the "interesting stranger" to be forgotten, so no one had remembered to ask whether he called.

CHAPTER II.

IT was about eleven o'clock the same night that the parson was sitting at the open window of his bedroom consoling himself with a cigarette—the consolation being needed, so he persuaded himself, because of the little upset at the Hall—when he heard the click of his gate, and presently saw in the dim light a figure coming towards his window.

“Hullo!” he said, “who’s there?” rather severely, as though it were some one trespassing.

“Don’t you know me, old boy, did you think I was a thief?”

He ran down to let the Squire in.

“Fact is, Thorn,” he said, “there was a fellow in the churchyard about a couple of hours ago, just after I left the Hall, and I could have sworn it was you. He was standing by the little cross, and I thought of course it was you coming over to tell me what the interview was about, and that perhaps you were staying to do a little sentimentalising over the grave. So I went to the wicket and called out to you, and the fellow didn’t move; and then I thought I’d go and make sure, and he was off in a moment and turned down the road towards the village. So when I saw another figure coming at this late hour I began to be suspicious, don’t you see, old boy? But come along and tell

me what's the news. Better come upstairs, I've lighted up there."

"Look here, Bart, tell me first," said the Squire as they sat down in the parson's room, "am I awake or dreaming? Is it true that you and I are really sitting here in the flesh?"

"Yes, Thorn; whatever is the matter?"

"Give me a thump on the shoulder, Bart; pinch me, hurt me in some way that I may be sure I am not dreaming; because I've dreamt it so often and woke up to find it false."

"Tell me, Thorn, what is it?" said the parson, getting alarmed at his cousin's appearance. "Will you have some brandy, you look bad?"

"Yes, I will. The reaction has come and made me feel faint. I couldn't go to bed without telling you. I can't go

to bed to-night at all. I couldn't sleep."

"Here take this first, old boy, before you say anything more. It will do you good. Don't put yourself out; there now, sit back and take it easy."

The parson had never seen his cousin look like this before. His face was quite white and the lips had turned blue, and the flashing grey eyes were dim.

"Oh, I'm all right," said the Squire presently, trying to smile. "You're a dear good fellow, Bart, taking care of me like this, I'm quite right again now."

"Don't be in a hurry, Thorn. I want to see you look all right first before you begin to talk." He was bathing his head with eau de Cologne. "There now, are you better?"

"Yes; don't look so anxious. I'm

all right ; happier than I've been for five years. She's going to leave me, Bart."

"Never !"

"Yes ; unless I'm dreaming. Am I?"

"No ; *I'm* not dreaming at any rate."

"Well, I've dreamt it so often that I fancy I shall presently wake up and find it not true."

"And she's really going?"

"Yes, really going."

"And the child?"

"No ; I had some trouble about it ; but I'm determined she shall not go. She wanted to take her, for what purpose I cannot understand, as I am sure she hates her, and she would of course be an additional expense ; but I was firm about it ; for I'd put up with the mother rather than lose the child

now. I have made use of her all these years to lighten my trouble, and now she has grown into my life. I couldn't part with her, Bart!"

"No, she has quite become one of the family."

"I little thought why she wanted me."

"How did it all come about?"

"I don't understand even now. She says she has been contemplating it for many months."

"One would hardly think so from her behaviour: she seemed contented enough."

"Yes, but you know she can always disguise her thoughts and intentions."

"Was it anything that happened to-day which decided her?"

"She pretended to be a little hurt at our arranging a holiday without her; but

I don't suppose she was. I think it is more likely she begins to find life dull here. You see at first she had the excitement of going about with Miss Green, and being introduced into the various houses; but for some time I have noticed that she is dreadfully bored with Miss Green, and she has over and over again insisted that I ought to take a house in town for the season."

"But she might have gone to town herself for the season had she chosen."

"Yes, that is exactly what I wanted her to do, and she wouldn't. She would give up any pleasure rather than leave me in quiet enjoyment of the place."

"It seems strange she should suddenly decide to go altogether: do you mean to say that she's not coming back?"

“Never coming back, thank God. A deed of separation is to be drawn up, and she is to have her marriage settlements, which were handsome; in fact, it will mean a little economy on my part.”

“Well, Thorn, you know I can’t help being glad about it, though of course it isn’t right that husbands and wives should separate. What God hath joined——”

“Don’t for Heaven’s sake think that God ever joined us. That was a bit of the devil’s work. Because you read a service over a couple of people in a church, Bart, do you suppose that God seals the compact? You may depend on it that He never looks on with approval at any marriage that is not a union of heart to heart, and soul to soul, as well as flesh to flesh. If there’s any truth in that pretty idyllic history of the Creation, which you

teach your people in church, Bart, woman was made to be a *companion* to man, not a mere bearer of children. And if she's not fit to be a companion, why, the intimacy becomes loathsome. No, my boy, don't preach to me about what God has joined together, but rejoice with me that He has freed me from that woman. Socially speaking, she is my wife, and, socially speaking, I have tried to do my duty. But in the sight of Heaven she is not my wife, and you, Bart, as a Christian may, I am sure, with a clear conscience join me in thanks for deliverance."

"I do, Thorn, I do."

"I can hardly realise that it's true, yet. I don't think I shall till she's gone."

"When does she go?"

"As soon as the deed can be drawn up. She says in the meantime she shall go to

town to-morrow to stay three or four days to make arrangements for a lodging of some sort, till she can make up her mind what she will do. Then she will come back to see her things packed and to sign the deed. I should like to get Pet out of the way when she comes back, because I think it will upset the child, and I don't quite know what to do."

"She ought to go out of the neighbourhood, and of course you can't go too."

"No, that's just the difficulty. I wish Fanny were here. She's such a capital help in any way."

"But what could she do."

"She might run off with her to Brighton or somewhere."

"So she might."

"I tell you what, Bart ! A capital idea ! Couldn't you go too ? You haven't had a change since that short visit to your

father's, and that must be nearly two years ago."

"It would be rather awkward to arrange in a hurry for anyone to take my duties, wouldn't it."

"Oh, I'll get old Marsham either to come or send his curate for just a Sunday, or two if need be; and the parish must take care of itself for a time; besides there's the lovely Sophia—she'll look after everything."

"I had better telegraph to Fanny, then, don't you think so, and ask her to come on Monday."

"Yes: I'm thinking, though I don't know how I shall get on without you myself, Bart, supposing there's any unpleasantness with her at the last."

"You must have some spirit, Thorn. You're so brave in everything else, and you let a woman crush you."

“It’s so difficult to fight with a woman. And she’s so curious in character that there’s no knowing what she’ll do. Perhaps at the last she’ll get up a scene. I wouldn’t have Pet there for anything.”

“I should think that, now you have agreed to separate, you are scarcely bound to remain in the house while she makes her preparations.”

“I suppose not; only somehow it seems the courteous thing to do. You see when you really love anyone there need be no question of courtesy, for you act simply from feeling; but when you hate a woman you feel bound to be polite, because she *is* a woman.”

“You’re an odd mixture, Thorn!”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You three go off as soon as we can arrange it, and I’ll join you directly she’s gone; for I shall be glad to get away from the place

when it's all over, and try to forget it all."

The next morning Keeley was astonished at seeing his master come into the stable-yard soon after seven o'clock.

"Look here, Keeley ! I want you to go over with this telegram at once, so that it is there directly the office opens. Go yourself, that I may be quite certain it is all right."

"Mistress not ill, Sir ?" said the coachman, in a tone that was cheerful rather than anxious.

"No, Keeley, no ; she's quite well."

"I heard as she was ailing yesterday, Sir, and the carriage was countermanded. I was afraid it might be serious, seeing you here so early."

The Squire knew the faithful old fellow would rejoice when he heard the

news, and he longed to tell him, for he regarded him as one of his best friends; but there were a stable-boy and groom in the yard, so he waited till Keeley went inside the stable, and following him, he said,

“I want you to be back as early as possible, Keeley, for I don’t know how soon Mrs. Meadows may want the carriage, probably quite early, for she’s going to London.”

“Yes, Sir, yes, Sir; you may depend on me.”

“And I think, Keeley, we might reduce the stable expenses a little now, for Mrs. Meadows is going away altogether.”

“What, Sir!” said Keeley, turning round suddenly on his master, “you don’t mean to say she’s going for good.”

“Yes, Keeley.”

“Oh, thank God! I beg pardon, Sir! I’m forgetting of myself.” He touched his cap. “I’m sure you’ll forgive me, Sir, but I was so taken aback.”

Sympathy had for the moment made them man and man instead of master and servant, and the Squire knew how truly the faithful fellow felt with him.

“I know you were thinking of me, Keeley, and it’s very good of you to sympathise.”

“I hope I’ve done my duty by her, Sir, as I’ve tried hard to.”

“And I, Keeley.”

“Ah! you’re too good, Sir. It isn’t every gentleman as ’ud bear it like you.”

The telegram was despatched, and Miss Fanny Broderick was rather startled just as she left the breakfast-table to

receive a telegram of some length from her brother Bart.

“Why, this must have cost him at least two and sixpence,” she said, counting the words, for with a view to her union to her “dearest Charlie” and poverty, she had now learnt to calculate the cost of everything.

Charley had been promoted to a vicarage and two hundred a year; and on this sum he and Fanny had rashly agreed to enter into matrimony; but with such a strong force of brothers and sisters as Fanny had, besides father and mother, all preaching on the evils of poverty, Fanny had reluctantly consented to wait a little longer; until they could at least save up something to fall back on.

Fanny used laughingly to declare that they should both be old and toothless before the time arrived; and she

informed everyone with great candour that she was "saving up her coppers" against the long looked-for day.

CHAPTER III.

MISS SOPHIA GREEN was in a state of astonishment. Her “dearest Isabella Meadows” had gone up to town without saying a word to her. Moreover, there were vague reports that there was “something up” at the Hall, and that the mistress of it was not coming back. The first Miss Green heard of this was when she went up to the Sunday-school in the morning. It disconcerted her all church time, so that she made several mistakes at the organ.

The choir wondered what could

have happened to their leader when she began the *Te Deum* instead of the *Venite*, and was unconscious of her mistake till reminded of it by the silence of the singers. Then she played a loud *Amen* in the middle of a prayer, and forgot it altogether on another occasion. The parson looked nervously across at her, as though he wondered whatever could be the matter, and what she'd do next.

The Squire was sitting in his own pew with his stepdaughter, a thing he had never done except during his wife's illness. This fact Miss Green soon discovered, and it added to her uneasiness. She had now for some few years past almost invariably lunched at the Vicarage on Sunday morning. Her own home, Reedlands, was some mile and a half away, and although she minded no weather, she found it rather a task to get home to lunch and back again to the

schools for the Sunday scholars at half-past two. Therefore she had been glad of the opportunity of lunching with her "dearest Isabella" at the Hall.

When the service was over, she hurried through the "voluntary" in hopes of being able to catch the Squire, who she thought would probably wait for Mr. Broderick. She was right in this, for the Squire waited till all had left, and then walked across to the vestry, and left with the parson by the vestry door.

Miss Green hurried round to catch them.

"Ah! Mr. Meadows!" she called out, for he was moving on quickly when he saw her, "I'm very anxious to speak to you." He turned round and lifted his hat. "Has dear Isabella had any bad news that she has run away so suddenly?"

I'm told she went to London yesterday."

"No," he said lightly, "nothing that I know of. She proposed going to town for a few days, and I suppose she'll come back about Wednesday or Thursday."

"Oh!" said Miss Green, rather disappointed at not hearing something more exciting. "Then she has only gone for a few days' visit. It was odd she never mentioned it to me. Could you give me her address? I want to ask her to execute a little commission for me."

"She talked of staying at the hotel at the Paddington terminus, but she did not wish any letters forwarded, as she would soon be back."

"Oh, I'm glad of that. I hear the Cottage is taken, Mr. Meadows."

"Indeed! I'm glad of that. I was not aware of it myself."

“Perhaps I have been misinformed then. I understood that a gentleman called on Isabella about it, and that she was delighted with him, for he stayed some time, and in fact lunched there. I thought to be sure you would know all about it.”

“No, I have heard nothing.”

“I fancied perhaps he was really a gentleman, as Isabella asked him to stay lunch, and I was thinking what an acquisition he would be in the neighbourhood. It is so long since we had anybody worth knowing there, isn’t it? for poor Captain Dallas was not quite the thing, now was he, Mr. Broderick?”

They were all walking together towards the Hall, Miss Green hoping she was to be included in the luncheon party.

As they reached the gates the

Squire stood still to shake hands, and the lady was obliged to walk on in a disappointed mood.

She walked quickly and sulkily along the road, and presently overtook Widow Webb, who being old and infirm could only toddle along slowly. Now Widow Webb knew that there was a certain commodity for which Miss Green was always a good market; in other words the widow had long since discovered that the lady liked gossip and would pay a good price for it.

Whether the money or gifts came from Miss Green herself, or through her from other people, the old woman never cared to inquire. She was one of what were called in the village "Miss Green's pets."

The old woman dropped her curtsey and dabbed her face with a coloured pocket-handkerchief, and sighed and groaned,

and said the weather was "a'most more nor she could bear."

"Poor thing!" said Miss Green, "it's a long way for you to come to church this warm weather, but if you have to suffer now, you'll have your reward in the next world, you know, and that's very comforting, isn't it?"

"Well, m'm, so 'tis, so 'tis, but I wishes a'most my time was come, and I don't care how soon I'm took."

"But that isn't right, you know, not at all right. We must bear what God thinks fit to send us, and count our suffering to his glory."

"A—men!" drawled out the widow. "I'm sure I try to bear it, m'm, but my legs is that shaky and trembly that I declare I can scarce stand sometimes. I wouldn' 'a-gone so far as to church to-day, but I wanted to go to the Hall to ask the housekeeper for some of them

'ere pills she give me afore, which did me a power o' good."

"Yes; and did she give you them?"

"She gave me two, and said I might go again when I'd took 'em; but she says as 'tis wittles I wants, not medicine."

"I'll mention you to Mrs. Meadows, and ask if you may be put on her list."

"She've gone away to Lun'on, she have; she went all on a sudden yesterday, and they was all a-talking about it in the kitchen afore church time."

"She's gone on a visit, hasn't she?"

"They didn't rightly know. But Miss Meadows she's a-goin' too, as I heard the lady's-maid herself say she'd a-got to pack the things. And Keziah up to parson's, she's a-'spectin' of Miss Fanny

to-morrow, and parson he's a-goin a Tuesday."

"Mr. Broderick going on Tuesday? You must be making a mistake. I should have heard of it if he were going away. Perhaps you didn't quite understand. Who told you about Mr. Broderick?"

"Keziah herself, m'm, as she'd a-got the feather-bed hanging out o' window for the young lady, as I saw it myself when I went to back door; and she says, Mrs. Webb, she says, you come round a-Tuesday evenin' when parson's gone and there'll be a bit of wittles for you, an' I says, thank you kindly, Mrs. Gibbon, I says."

Miss Green questioned the old woman a little further, and finding she had extracted all she knew hurried on, for she was already very late. What could it all mean, she wondered? And only to

think that all these events were taking place, and she, who knew everything before other people, was in ignorance. And whatever did Isabella mean by going off like that and never telling her anything? It was disgraceful of her; and like her slyness; and she believed after all she was a deceitful woman, and something queer would turn up about her some day.

Why was she so reserved? And why did she never have any friends or relations come to see her? Perhaps she was an adventuress after all; and that romantic story about her youth and first marriage was made up. Perhaps that girl was illegitimate.

A nice thing for the Squire of Overton to be bringing up an illegitimate child. Perhaps Mr. Meadows knew all about it, and that was why he had separate apartments. But however did Mr.

Broderick get mixed up in it all, for he must be if he's going away all in a hurry. And that horrid Fanny coming too. Conceited girl! Thinks she knows everything.

If Isabella turns out an adventuress a nice thing for the family! There's evidently something wrong from what Mrs. Markham said up at the schools. It will be a judgment on Thornton Meadows. What would the old Squire have said? It's all through the wickedness of that young Thornton. Sinners always get paid out at last.

Such were some of the thoughts that raced through Miss Green's mind as she hurried along the road to Reedlands.

With a scowl on her face and her lips set vindictively she joined her family at the luncheon-table.

She certainly did not give one the impression at that moment that she had devoted the morning to the praise and glory of God.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN the earth has been frost-bound for weeks how eagerly we watch day after day for a thaw! The evergreen trees and bushes hang their heads, and seem to shrink up into themselves. The birds flit about uneasily from place to place in search of food, with never an attempt to sing, but only a hoarse croak now and then when hunger presses. The earth is altogether shut up from us, and we can only wait and watch.

Then at last the thaw comes, and the trees begin to assert themselves once

more, and there is a sound of twittering of birds everywhere; not a loud song as in the brilliant spring weather, but a low chant—an expression of thankfulness.

Such was the feeling that was experienced by Thornton Meadows and his stepdaughter when Mrs. Meadows left Overton Hall. They sang, as it were, their little low songs of thankfulness like the birds. They used no words perhaps, but they expressed it in looks and actions. They clung together more than ever, and each seemed to watch every action of the other. They congratulated one another in every look, and found new cause for gratitude in every pleasure.

Perhaps no two human creatures were ever happier than the Squire and his step-daughter for those first few months, when the beautiful young girl

reigned as temporary mistress of the Hall.

But Thornton Meadows was evidently destined not to enjoy real happiness. A terrible truth had for some time been dawning on him, and he had done his utmost to shut it out and prove it false. Is it possible that anyone, not a father, can realise what a father's love is? The Squire thought it was.

When he adopted poor little Isabel Carstairs he honestly and truly thought he could be a father to her. He intended to bring her up in the best possible way after his own method, which was strange enough to ordinary people, and then to provide a suitable dowry on her marriage. But there grew up in his mind by degrees a dread of the time when he must part with her; and this dread gradually shaped itself into a feeling that he could never

bear to see another man take possession of her. And then came the question, was this a father's love? How he reasoned with himself day after day that there had been selfish fathers before him who could not bear to part with their children! But day after day also came the conviction that the love he bore for the girl was not the love of a father.

Here was a new trouble—the worst of all it seemed to him; for it must be borne silently—it was too unholy a thing to be whispered even to the parson, who had hitherto known his every thought. It must be conquered—if it were possible—and the child herself must never guess at the truth.

When a man who, to use the Squire's own words, has made a hash of his life, falls in love at five and thirty, he is likely to be in earnest. What made the

matter worse with Thornton Meadows was that he had not "fallen" in love. The love had grown on him. He tried over and over again to trace the commencement of it, but could not. He despised himself for it, yet he could not conquer it. He analysed it and dissected it as became a philosopher; but love beat philosophy.

He felt what a wretched impostor he was to offer the child the pure and disinterested love of a father, while he had within him the passion of the lover. What could he do? he continually asked himself. Send her away, said Conscience; but then she would be unhappy, argued Inclination.

The question had shaped itself more definitely in the Squire's mind of late, because Mr. Ackerman, the "interesting stranger" who had taken the Cottage, showed an unmistakeable interest in the

young lady. He was not exactly the man that the Squire would have chosen as a husband for his step daughter; but his age was the only objection.

“And yet,” thought the Squire to himself, “he’s but a few years older than I am, and I’m fool enough to be in love with her, so why shouldn’t he?”

Scarcely a year had passed since Arthur Ackerman had come to live at Overton; but he was already on familiar terms with the Squire and parson. They found him to be a man after their own heart, and took pleasure in his society. He was full of freshness and life, for he had just come back from a many years’ residence in Australia, and could tell of all sorts of wild adventures.

He found a very willing listener in the beautiful girl, whom he had admired so much when he first saw the house.

He often used to tell her laughingly that he had come to the place on purpose to be near her. But his admiration was always openly expressed before her stepfather or cousin; and although there was extreme tenderness in his manner towards her, it was the tenderness of an elder relation.

But Thornton Meadows, with the wicked love in his heart, construed it otherwise. A pang of jealousy shot through him when he saw how the child delighted in Mr. Ackerman's society.

He tormented himself with the thought that, whether it was to be Ackerman or anyone else, the time was coming when his beloved Pet must marry. She was exceedingly attractive, and notwithstanding her supposed youth, she had looked like a woman for the last two years. It would be worse than wicked for him

to stand in the way of her marrying, because he cherished an illegal and unholy affection for her.

If Ackerman asked her, and she was willing, should he give his consent? She would still be near him—no, that was too dreadful a thought—when once she was married he must not see her. Thus he argued with himself day after day. It never occurred to him that Bart Broderick might fall in love with her. No: good, steady, honest, plodding Bart was steel-proof against women. He had never been troubled with a love affair; he had settled down into bachelor life, and was not likely to let his head be turned by his pretty young pupil.

“Papa!” said Pet one morning at breakfast as she sat with girlish dignity at the head of the table, “it will be my birthday next Saturday; we must do something in honour of it, mustn’t we?”

“Yes, do you remember what an important day it turned out last year?”

“Yes, I should think so indeed! I shall remember that birthday all my life! Don’t you think, papa, it’s very stupid for me to be called only fifteen? Of course I must be older, and I feel it’s so silly to tell everyone I’m only fifteen, and yet I don’t know exactly what to say I am.”

“I suspect your poor mother disguised your age to make herself appear younger. You are probably seventeen or perhaps eighteen.”

“Couldn’t we find out somehow?”

“I don’t see how we can. Your mother says you were born in London, but I never inquired in what parish.”

“Couldn’t the lawyers ask her?”

“I’m afraid she would not tell; for if she wanted to make herself out to be

younger she no doubt has still the same little vanity."

"They might ask her; it would do no harm, and perhaps after all she might tell them."

"It's not of so very much consequence. It's only just at this period of your life it shows; in another few years you won't mind dropping a year or two."

"But I should really like to know my age, papa, for it's ridiculous for a woman of my size to be called fifteen."

"Woman do you call yourself! eh, little one?"

"Well, papa, I'm woman enough to take care of you, and manage your house, and I do it very well, don't I, Pupsy dear?" and she got up and put her arms round him and kissed him all over his face.

"That's enough, Pet," said the Squire,

extricating himself and looking very uncomfortable.

"Why, papa, I do believe you're getting tired of your troublesome Pet; you're always telling me that's enough when I kiss you."

"No, darling, I'm not tired of you. I'm getting old and cross."

"Old and corss! Why, you know nobody believes you're my father because you look so young; they always think I'm your wife or sister, and I'm so proud when they do. Now I really must pull your curls to punish you. It's no good to tell me to go away, for I *will* punish you for saying you're old and cross. There now!" pulling vigorously at his hair, and then kissing his forehead.

"Well, and what is it we're to do on your birthday?"

"Let me see, what did we do last

year? Why, we went over the Cottage, and that was the first time we saw Mr. Ackerman, don't you remember? We little thought how much we should like him by this time, did we?"

She was standing by her father's chair, running her fingers through his curls.

"No, it was very strange."

"And how the Cottage has altered since then, hasn't it? Do you remember how we planned what we should do if we lived there? I think Mr. Ackerman has made it even prettier than we should have done."

"Yes, he's improved it considerably."

"And, papa, do you remember how he stared at me that day, and how you chaffed me?"

"Yes, Pet, and I think he seems to find just as much pleasure in looking at you now."

"Yes, he says he does, because I re-

mind him of some one he liked once. I think he's such a dear, good man."

"I think you're quite in love with him, little one, aren't you?"

"Yes, I really am, he is so amusing."

"You treat it all as a joke, Pet, but—Ackerman, you know—well Pet, of course you are, as you say, getting quite a woman, and—and——"

"Yes, papa."

"Perhaps Ackerman isn't in joke."

"Why, papa! do you mean to say you think he's seriously fallen in love with me?"

"I'm afraid he has."

"Oh never, papa! He's just like a dear old grandfather. Do you know I can't help loving that man, there's something about him I seem to take to. I wish he was some relation to me, uncle, you know, or brother, or grandfather even, and then I might love him as

much as I like. He always seems so old to me."

"But, Pet dear, while you think it may be nice to love him as a relation, you may all the time be causing him great suffering, for he probably loves you in quite another way."

"Oh, dear old Mr. Ackerman! I'm sure he's not in love."

"How do you know when you've had no experience in such matters, child?"

"Oh, haven't I, you dear silly papa! If *somebody's* in love it isn't Mr. Ackerman;" and she gave her stepfather a kiss on the back of his neck and ran off before he could speak.

CHAPTER V.

THE Squire went into his study and locked the door. Whatever could Pet mean, he wondered, by that last sentence? Had she found him out? Impossible, or her manner would be different. She was the same as ever to him. Yet what could she mean? He thought of the men in the neighbourhood she occasionally met, but there were scarcely any single ones amongst them, and she was so open and honest that she would be sure to have told her father if any had paid her attention.

Should he ask her what she meant?

No ; because if she knew the horrible truth — but impossible — she couldn't. Thus he tormented himself for an hour. Then he went to look after her studies, and instead of sitting down with her as he was accustomed to do every morning, he set her some tasks and pleaded business which would keep him in his own room.

“ Papa, dear ! ” she said rather timidly as he reached the door to leave the room.

“ Yes, Pet.”

“ You're vexed with me, aren't you ? ”

“ No ; why should I be ? ”

“ You seem so funny this morning, I can't help thinking you're vexed.”

“ But what have I to be vexed about ? ”

“ Why, you're annoyed about Mr. Ackerman, papa. You think I've been making him fall in love with me.”

"Nonsense, child, I simply wanted to warn you for his sake."

"I'm beginning to wish I was a little girl again."

"Why?"

"I don't like this bother about falling in love. I should like to love a man without that."

"You silly child!"

"You're really not angry then, papa?"

"No, dear."

"Then stroke my head and call me a good girl, as you always used to."

"It's a silly Pet, it is, this morning," he said, stroking her brown hair.

"There; I can go on with my exercise, papa, now that you look all right. Good-bye, darling, till I see you again."

The Squire walked rapidly out of the room. "Confound it!" he thought

as he crossed the hall to his study. "I do believe she knows it, and yet if she did how could she be so innocent of it in her manner towards me? It must make a difference to her if she did."

The Squire's business consisted of some mathematical problems which he set himself to solve to keep his thoughts from the subject that tormented him. He had spent many hours in this way during the last six years. It was in the troublous times with his wife that he had mastered a couple of languages, and thus been able to become acquainted with the "*Divina Commedia*" in the original.

He sat down to his papers, but the figures danced before his eyes; and the two conversations of the morning kept repeating themselves in

his ears. He paced up and down the room, and threw himself first in one chair and then another. If only he could tell his terrible secret to some one it would be easier to bear. He was a man who craved sympathy in everything, whether in enjoyment or trouble. He could not live in himself. He must have some one who understood him and felt with him. Had his own people sympathized with him more in his youth, he would probably have kept in better with the ruck of humanity—would have been less eccentric.

His excess of feeling caused him to do Quixotic things, and all the more because that feeling had been as much as possible repressed in childhood. It was a chivalrous Quixotism which caused him to marry Mrs. Carstairs, because he believed her reputation was injured through

him. He had had to suffer dearly for it; but he had to suffer even more now, for he felt that he was committing a horrible crime, which he could not even mention to his friend Broderick.

One thing he determined before he met his daughter again that morning. He would take her out into society, and give her an opportunity of seeing men who would be likely to suit her; and if any chance of marriage arose, he would do everything to further it. And then—Ah! that was the dreadful thought. What would he do when she had gone? Drag out a broken life as best he could.

What a promising life it was when he left Oxford! How many young men envied him at that time when he went away to take possession of his estate and property! And now he was the most miserable of mortals, with a hated wife

who made him a byword amongst his neighbours ; and an incestuous love in his heart for the girl over whom he was placed legally as a father.

CHAPTER VI.

“**N**OW, Papa !” said Pet, turning round at the dining-room door, which the parson held open for her, “don’t you and Cousin Bart sit there talking over your wine and forget all about me. I want a little walk with you in the grounds before it gets quite dark, for you know you’ve never stirred outside all day, and it’s made you look so cross, and Laddie and I have been wondering whatever kept you in so much. You’ll find me out in front waiting for you, and I’ll let you smoke if you’re good.”

“You certainly do look worried to-day, Thorn,” said the parson, as he took his seat again at the table. “Heard anything unpleasant?”

“No, Bart, I’m jolly enough. I was only bothering myself a bit about Pet. I’ve come to the conclusion it’s rather difficult to bring up a girl without the help of a woman.”

“Ah! I thought you’d find it so.”

“Of course it’s easy enough so long as she’s a child. But you see the fact is Pet’s a good bit older than her mother led us to believe.”

“No doubt of that.”

“And of course she’s getting of an age when girls become attractive.”

“Yes,” said the parson, taking up a strawberry stalk and twisting it round and round, looking down at it the while.

The Squire was pushing about the

cherry-stones on his plate with a dessert fork, making patterns of them.

“Girls at that time are so capricious and odd, one hardly knows how to manage them,” he said.

“I suppose it’s just the time when they want a mother to look after them. She knows by experience what they feel.”

“Of course, that’s it, and that’s the difficulty I’m feeling about it.”

The parson twisted his stalk more vigorously than ever, and seemed afraid of lifting his eyes from his plate.

“You know, Bart,” went on the Squire, while he pushed his cherry-stones into a fresh pattern, “a girl at that age doesn’t know the mischief she is doing. She fancies she can entertain a friendship for men in just the same way as she would for women.”

“Yes,” said the parson, looking wretched.

“And while she with her pretty eyes means only friendliness, the unfortunate victim——”

“Thorn, don’t reproach me,” said the parson, “I couldn’t help it, I know I am a fool.”

“Whatever do you mean, Bart?” said the Squire, looking up in astonishment.

“Mean! Why, of course you’ve seen what’s the matter, Thorn, or why did you say anything about it? It’s more than you can expect of human nature that I can go on day after day sitting with that lovely girl and not feel her influence. I get as far away from her as I can, but she seems to draw me to her by some power as completely as though she had tied a rope round me. I can

stand it no longer, Thorn ! I must give up teaching her."

"Good heavens, Bart ! do you mean that you are really in love with her?"

"God help me, Thorn ! I am. I don't know how it happened. I've prayed for help to conquer my wicked passion. Don't despise me, Thorn, I *will* conquer it. I feel that I must seem such a monster to you, to have betrayed the trust you put in me."

The Squire was pushing the cherry-stones about pell-mell without regard to pattern, and Broderick took his perplexed look to denote displeasure.

"You hate me for it, Thorn," went on the parson, "and I deserve it. But you don't know the temptation ! You can't realise it ! To you she is only as a daughter, and you don't understand the exquisite——Thorn ! don't look like that, I've suffered enough already, God

knows: and you can't blame me more than I blame myself. I never thought I could be such a fool: and such a wicked sinner."

The Squire seemed unable to utter a word.

"You must forgive me, Thorn! I'll go away: I'll do anything rather than forfeit your friendship. We have been such old friends, and now I have let a wretched weakness of the flesh interfere between us. Have a little pity for me, old boy! Try and put yourself in my place. To you she is only a loving daughter, you can't understand what I feel. It was a mistake, Thorn, a mistake to bring her up in this way. You should have had women to teach her."

"Don't reproach yourself, Bart," said the Squire, in a broken voice.

"But I do, Thorn, I shall never cease to reproach myself for being so dis-

honourable. You trusted her to me because you believed in me. You would never have allowed any other man to be alone with her as I have been. And I have behaved as a common scoundrel."

"I don't see that, Bart. Have you told her you love her?"

"Oh, dear, no, I should never have ventured to do so; but I fancy from her manner she knows it."

"And do you suppose she loves you?"

"No, I fancy it is just what you were saying about her wanting to have friendship without love. I believe she looks upon me as an amiable old relation. That was what made me fancy you knew all about it."

"No: I was thinking of Ackerman at the time. She treats him much in the same way; and I believe that man devours every word she says to him."

“So do I.”

“Poor dear Bart! Don’t blame yourself so much. There’s nothing wrong in your love for her. No canon forbids your marriage. She is only your cousin-in-law. Why not ask her to marry you? You have my consent, dear old boy.”

“Thorn!”

“Yes; why not? We’ve been the best of friends for many years; we shall only alter our relationship if you marry Pet. I shall be your father-in-law. Don’t you see; and you’ll have to be very deferential.”

“But that would be too ridiculous. No, Thorn, it’s very kind of you to put it in that light, but I’m not going to take advantage of your goodness. I must get over it as best I can; and I can only do that by keeping out of her way. I ought to leave the neighbourhood.”

“Come, that won’t do, Bart. There’s

no reason why you shouldn't have your chance with her as well as anyone else. You must ask her. I shall not be satisfied till you do. Ask her to-night."

"I couldn't, Thorn, I couldn't."

"Nonsense, you must pluck up a little courage. Go out now. Strike while the iron's hot. I'll wait inside."

The parson left the room.

"Thank God," murmured the Squire to himself, "she doesn't suspect me. That was what she meant evidently."

He pushed his chair away, and paced up and down the room.

"What a mistake it was," he said to himself, "by Jove, it was! If I, her own stepfather, have behaved in such a rascally way, who can blame Broderick? Poor dear Bart! Anyone would think he had committed as great a crime as I have! I wish I had his chances! I wonder whether she cares for him! I

should think not from what she said. And if she does! Good heavens! I must lose both of them. The only two in the world I have ever really cared for! What a selfish wretch I am! I ought to rejoice in their happiness, and look on it with satisfaction. That's what Bart would do if our positions were reversed. Fancy his being in love! and with Pet too! What an unlucky man I am! I seem destined to bring misery to myself whatever I do."

He kept on pacing uneasily, occasionally going up to one of the windows to see if he could catch a glimpse of the parson and Pet; but they were evidently some way from the house. He walked up and down till the light faded, and just as he was going out at the garden door, his cousin came in.

"The answer, Bart?" said Thorn, hoarsely, taking his arm.

“It’s no good,” said the parson, dejectedly. “She loves me dearly as her master and cousin, she says, but she has no idea of marriage.”

The dim light prevented the parson from seeing the expression on his friend’s face at that moment.

Thornton Meadows felt wickedly triumphant. “I shall not lose her yet,” he thought to himself, and then he hated himself for the thought the very next minute.

CHAPTER VII.

MISS ISABEL CARSTAIRS, or Miss Meadows as she was now called, was in an unfortunate position. Both of her tutors had fallen in love with her, and her chances of further instruction were dubious.

“Pet!” said her father on the morning before her birthday, “I think now you are such a little woman we must give up regular lessons.”

“Oh, papa!” she said reproachfully, “*you* won’t give up teaching me as well as Cousin Bart, will you?”

She understood well enough that Mr.

Broderick could no longer be her master.

“My dear, I have been upbraiding myself lately that I have never given you an opportunity of learning anything from your own sex, except when you took music lessons from Miss Davis. It seems to me that a girl’s education cannot really be finished without certain little touches that only a woman can give; and I should like to find some accomplished woman who would come for a few months and look after you.”

“Papa! You said you’d never have anyone of that sort here.”

“But I have thought differently since, child. It will only be for a short time; and I shall not feel I have done my duty unless I engage a lady for you. You see, darling, I am placed in an awkward position. You have unfortu-

nately no mother to guide you, and you are at an age when female guidance is most wanted. I should like to find someone who would take the place of a mother to you for a short time; until you are properly launched into society, you know."

"Society, papa! I thought you hated what you call society!"

"So I do, Pet; but I must not keep you shut up here seeing no one. You must go out into the world a bit, and see things for yourself, and receive other impressions than those I give you. You know I'm scarcely fit to bring up a young girl; I have different ideas from most people; and am what is generally called odd in my notions."

"Yes, dear papa, I know all that, and can see it for myself, and it's just what I like in you. I don't want to mix in society. I'm happy with you

and always shall be. When you take me out to lunch or dinner I'm never quite happy. I can see how different you are from other people. They are all so stiff and seem to be acting; and you always say out what you think. I shall never like any other sort of life than this."

"But, Pet, suppose some day you meet a gentleman who loves you very much—and he may be like most other gentlemen in his ways and ideas, and not like your stupid eccentric father—what will you do if you know nothing of the society in which he moves? It would be awkward for you; and everyone would say how badly you had been brought up."

"Then I'd rather be brought up badly, please, pa, and I don't want to marry, and, popsy dear," kissing him, "if you love me you will never—never

—never again let anyone ask me unless I tell you to, will you?"

"Not even Mr. Ackerman?"

"Oh, dear old Mr. Ackerman! of course he'd never dream of such a thing."

"Well, dear, we'll get some nice lady to take care of you for a time, and then nobody will dare to ask, you know."

"Are you in earnest, papa dear, about a governess?"

"We need not call her a governess exactly."

"Yes, do, papa, I don't want anyone to think I'm out of the schoolroom now, because there's all this dreadful bother about falling in love. But shan't I do any more lessons with you?"

"Of course we'll keep up the classics, and go on with our Dante together, and anything that the—governess is it

to be?—can't manage; but we must leave the lady to cut out the day as she thinks proper."

"How very miserable, papa!"

"Nonsense, Pet! You can't always have everything as you like it. We must study the world a little bit, you know. I've been thinking that you might as well ask Fanny to come and pay you one more visit before she's married."

"Why, papa, she's dreadfully busy with her trousseau; I don't believe she'd come."

"Oh, tell her to bring her paraphernalia with her. We'll help her, tell her."

"As if you could, papa!"

Fanny Broderick and her "dearest Charlie" were at last going to be married. There was still only the two hundred a year and a small vicarage

house to look forward to; but Thornton Meadows had placed a very handsome sum in the bank to the account of the young couple, and old Mr. Broderick had agreed to give his daughter fifty pounds a year now that all the rest of his girls, except the eldest, were married.

Fanny was making her clothes in the most economical fashion possible, and was in the habit of writing long letters to Pet, detailing to her the various stages the garments were in. An invitation at this crisis seemed rather out of place to Fanny; but after considering the matter for a short time she packed up all her needlework and odds and ends, and sewing-machine, and started for Overton Hall.

Her last visit, which was on the occasion of the hurried visit to Brighton, had extended to over six months, spent

partly at the Vicarage and partly at the Hall, when Miss Green might be said to have been utterly routed. When Mrs. Meadows left, Miss Green was the first to turn on her.

“I always thought there was something strange about her,” said she of the lynx eyes, to her confidential friends. “She was so reserved, and so anxious to impress one with her position, and so mysterious about her early life. My dear friend Arabella was quite right about her. I ought to have taken her word for it. She’s a woman of great penetration, I am sure, poor dear, I don’t know what her feelings must be at the present state of things. Mr. Meadows is completely deserted by every member of his family. His heir I have heard is a very doubtful character, very doubtful indeed; greatly in debt I’m told. I don’t know what the place will

come to. Poor dear Arabella! I hope she may not live to see it! It would break her heart."

This subject served Miss Green for full two months, by which time she began to turn her attention to Mr. Ackerman, and to commence her old hostility with Fanny Broderick.

Whenever the young lady was mentioned, Miss Green would shake her head sorrowfully, and remark that it was "very suspicious that the moment that unfortunate Mrs. Meadows was out of the place, Miss Broderick should turn up, especially as she'd never been able to face her cousin's wife since that very unpleasant little affair, when it was whispered that there had been undue intimacy between herself and her cousin."

Keziah, who quite disclaimed having anything to do with gossips, never-

theless seemed to hear everything; and she very soon informed Miss Fanny that there was a most shameful report about that she was "a-going on with the Squire."

Fanny and the old housekeeper were ready to tear Miss Green's eyes out; but when Fanny had somewhat recovered from her rage she began to think how she could best refute the reports that were circulated about her. The result of her cogitation was that "dearest Charlie" was soon introduced bodily into Overton, and spent a "parson's fortnight" at the Hall. The young clergyman was an earnest, hard-working fellow, with more perseverance than talent perhaps; but Fanny had such belief in his powers that she quite expected to see him a bishop some day.

With great pride she saw him mount into the pulpit of Overton church, and

with a feeling that her brother Bart afterwards said was not by any means a Christian one, she watched Miss Green narrowly while the wonderful Charlie delivered a sermon on back-biters.

“Don’t he preach beautifully?” said Fanny to Miss Green, when greetings were being exchanged outside the church; “and he chose such an appropriate subject for this place, for it’s the back-bitingest neighbourhood I ever knew. I told Charlie I thought it was unwise of him to come here, as he’d be sure to lose his character in a week. I hope, poor dear, he’ll get back safe without having half-a-dozen women besides myself put down to him.”

“To tell the truth,” said Miss Green, “I must confess to not having heard much of the sermon, for I was suffering from a bad head-ache and could not fix

my attention on what was said. But I've no doubt it was good, Miss Broderick."

"Really I'm very sorry you did not hear, for it was so very appropriate. Shall I ask Charlie to send his manuscript up for you to read? I'm sure he'd do it to oblige me."

"Thanks, I've so much to occupy me just now. Good morning!"

"Look at that wicked old green-eyed cat!" said Fanny to her brother, pointing to Miss Green, who was walking quickly up the road. For which remark Miss Fanny received a severe lecture.

Mr. Ackerman had not been in his new house a week before he was pounced on by Miss Green for subscriptions. He paid the money willingly and cheerfully; but the subscriptions were only a

secondary object to Miss Green. It was a little of his family history she wanted to know : and this was just what he was not inclined to give. As she said to some of her own set afterwards, "I wanted to discover if he was 'one of us,' you know ; whether we can call ; but he gave no clue whatever as to his social position."

"Is he a bachelor or a widower?" asked one of those suffering, long-waiting ones who have still a sort of forlorn hope of marriage.

"I really could not say. I could gain no information beyond the fact that he has resided many years in Australia."

"Perhaps he left a wife there," suggested one.

"There's no knowing," said Miss Green. "Men are so very deceitful ; you can never trust them." At which

there was a general chorus of assent.

And so it came about, for these things never lose in the telling, that Mr. Ackerman was reported to be a very reserved man, with plenty of money, and a wife hidden away somewhere in Australia.

The surprise of the village gossips, the humble imitators of Miss Green, at Mrs. Meadows's departure was no less great than that of Miss Green herself.

Miss Royds at the village shop was loud in her lamentations; for the Squire's wife had been the best customer she ever had. But finding that the lady was really gone, and that there was no chance of making anything more out of her, she very seriously advised all the women who dealt with her to make friends with

“young Miss” up at the Hall. She also discovered that “the young Squire was a very kind gentleman indeed,” especially just as Christmas was coming, when she expected to receive a large order for gifts to be distributed amongst the poor.

But unluckily the Squire was seized at this time with a desire to convert the Little Salem building into a small store for the village, where provisions and dry goods and drapery could be obtained cheaply for ready money, which Miss Royds characterised as “taking the bread out of her mouth.” It was pointed out to her that the long credit she gave and the high prices she charged helped to pauperise the people, and that the benefit of the many must be considered before that of the one. But it was in vain: she characterised the Squire as a “low, mean

fellow who interfered with trade, and who ill-treated his wife, so that the poor thing couldn't live with him."

Ford, the blacksmith, was triumphant at the departure of Mrs. Meadows.

"There now! didn't I tell you there was more inside her nor ever you'd see outside? And ain't my words come true? And there's something up more'n you knows on in this 'ere sudden going away, or my name's not Jack Ford."

This was said to Bob Keeley the day after the departure, and Bob looked knowingly mysterious, as if he could tell a thing or two if he liked.

"I don't care for your silent ones," said Ford, "they're generally a-hidin' something, and I shouldn't wonder, Bob, but what you and me, if we likes, could

about make a guess what she's a-hidin' on."

"Well, well," said Bob, "she's gone now, and you and me ain't the ones to speak behind anyone's back."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Mrs. Meadows left Overton Hall she gave her husband no information as to where she was going, but simply required that her letters should be forwarded to the bankers in London, where her money was to be paid in half-yearly, commencing from the Midsummer day previous to that on which the separation took place. The money had been paid in and was drawn upon, and that was all the Squire knew.

Where Mrs. Meadows actually lived, or

rather where she kept the bulk of her luggage, and where she could occasionally be found, was in a quiet street between Park Lane and Grosvenor Square, into which lodging-house keepers had gradually crept. The lodgings were provided principally for bachelors; "men about town" who live at their clubs, or at other people's houses, and who want simply night shelter, and bathing and dressing accommodation. Some of the houses had their regular customers; others depended on the London season, when they would make enough to pay their expenses for the year.

The house in which Mrs. Meadows was living was one to which she had often directed letters from Overton—letters to a Mrs. Carey, whom she occasionally spoke of as a great friend, and who, she sometimes told Miss Green, begged her

to come up and stay with her during the season.

To the door of this house Mrs. Meadows drove up one Friday afternoon in July, the very same Friday on which Thornton Meadows had made the disagreeable announcement to his daughter that he should get a governess for her. The vehicle was one of those roomy broughams which can so easily be hired for either a short or long period in the West End of London. The coachman was more obsequious than hired coachmen usually are. Mrs. Meadows had a knack of commanding the attention of servants. He got down and rang the bell, and stood at the door of the brougham as if he were the lady's own footman.

"Haddon!" she said, as she stepped out, "I shall not want you again at present, except to take me to the station to-morrow, and as I am very well pleased

with you, I give you this for yourself."

"Thank you, my lady."

"And mind you're punctual to-morrow morning, at half past ten."

"Yes, my lady."

Mrs. Meadows walked in, and upstairs to the first floor, where her rooms were. She rang the bell, and sat down languidly on the sofa.

A twelvemonth had altered her somewhat. Perhaps the heat accounted for the fact that she looked much paler than she used to do. But it was hardly the heat that had given an anxious look to her face. She was a woman whose age it was impossible to tell, because she never gave any play to her expression. Her face was absolutely without lines. There was the same "eternal smile," as Thornton Meadows called it; but there was a sickly look of fear mixed up with the smile

now, that she had never shown when she was mistress of Overton Hall.

A maid who had been engaged specially to wait on Mrs. Meadows, and act as lady's-maid also, answered the bell.

"Will you beg Mrs. Carey to come to me?" said Mrs. Meadows.

Mrs. Carey presently appeared. She was a middle-aged woman who had probably been handsome, but was at this time very faded; a fact that was the more noticeable because of her youthful style of dress.

"I'm so very tired, Laura," said Mrs. Meadows to this lady; "I can't think why I should be, unless it's the warm weather."

"Yes, and you've had so many things to attend to to-day. I don't wonder at it. Have a cup of tea?"

"Yes, I think I will, for I want to just settle all the little things with

you this afternoon, and then I think I'll lie down for an hour before dinner."

"Yes, dear, it will do you good."

"And, Laura, don't let that girl bring up the tea or do anything more. I can't bear her. She seems always to be prying about trying to find out things."

"I'll bring it up myself, and have a cup with you."

"And couldn't you send her off presently? Everything's packed, and I don't want her any more: and you'll tidy up after me, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, I'll manage."

The tea was brought, and Mrs. Meadows revived a little after drinking it.

"Now," she said, "let us settle everything. First here are my larger bills, for which I've written cheques.

You'll take those round and pay them?"

"Yes: you may depend on me."

"Next, here are a few small bills, seven pounds thirteen altogether: there it is in money. You'll pay those?"

"Yes, Bella."

"And here are the wages for that girl for the three months, which would be up next week, six pounds. Give it her and get her off at once."

"Very well."

"And the state of things between us is that you owe me nearly a month's board and lodging, isn't it, Laura? Because you know I made up the rent for you."

"Yes, that's it, I suppose," said Mrs. Carey, dejectedly. "But I don't know what I shall do when next quarter comes round, because of course it's so near the end of the season now, that no one will

be wanting the rooms. I've no chance of anyone taking these till November, at least, if then."

"But I've paid you well, Laura, you can't complain. And you know you really are extravagant."

"You always say that, Bella, and I'm sure I can't see that I am. I am always scraping and saving."

"Yes, you save up for a little time, and directly you see the chance of any pleasure you rush off without counting the consequences."

"Well, I must have a little bit of change sometimes; I can't for ever be muddling about the house as if I was a common servant."

"At any rate you're much better off than you were! You've got into a good neighbourhood, and have a much better class of people with you——"

"But only think of the rent!"

“Yes, Laura, but you never begin to think of it till it’s due, and then you’re rushing everywhere to get it.”

“It’s all very well for you to talk, Bella, with your lovely income. I wish I was you !”

“Do you indeed ! It’s not a comfortable position, though of course it *is* pleasant to have money. But I think, Laura, with the sums you’ve had from me for the last six years, you’ve nearly been able to pay your rent from them alone.”

“Well, Bella, I don’t think you need remind me of what you’ve given. I’m sure I nearly starved myself to help you when Carstairs went away.”

“And I’m sure you were well repaid when I took the child’s money out and risked being put in prison for it. Not to mention all I’ve done since. You’ve

been levying blackmail on me all these years, just to keep a miserable secret." She leant back on the sofa languidly.

"You'd never have got the money if I hadn't kept the secret."

"And so you think you are always to be draining me of it. You make my life a burden to me. I had better keep abroad when I get there."

"Bella! don't get angry with me! You don't know how wretched it is to go dragging on counting every shilling I spend, and to have to be a mere drudge."

"Oh, yes, I do, Laura! I worked harder than you do, and put up with a great deal more. You might have done quite as well as I have if you'd tried at the right time."

"It's so easy to say that. I never had the pluck that you have, or your manners;

or your looks for that matter, Bella. I don't know how you manage to keep so young. You're as old as I am, but you haven't a wrinkle or a grey hair. And whatever happens you never seem to be put out."

"Well, I think you've put me out pretty well this afternoon, Laura; at any rate you've tried. But because I don't say much you think I don't feel. If I were to rouse myself into a passion—and I declare, Laura, you're enough to provoke anyone;" — she raised herself on the sofa and looked fiercely at her companion — but sank back again, putting her hand to her left side and saying, "But there! what a fool I am! I shall be quite knocked up, and unfit for travelling to-morrow, and you know how bad a journey makes me. Where's my smelling-bottle."

Mrs. Carey handed it to her. She lay back for a few minutes, closing her eyes.

“Of course, Bella,” said Mrs. Carey, “I don’t want to annoy you. We’ve been friends for so many years and seen a deal of trouble together——”

“Friends!” said Mrs. Meadows. “Well! I suppose that’s how friendship goes in this world! There was a time when I had the chance of calling a true heart all my own, but I never found it out till it was too late. I lost it; and I’ve played a desperate game since—a desperate game rather than face poverty. Ha, ha!”

She laughed feebly, and without unclosing her eyes.

“Poor boy!” she went on; “poor silly boy!”

“And then,” said Mrs. Carey, returning persistently to the old subject, “of

course, Bella, I must devote one room to all these odds and ends of yours, as you don't want anyone else to have the use of them ; so you might consider the rent of that room."

"Is it a few miserable pounds you're still bothering about?" said Mrs. Meadows, opening her eyes. "Dear me, I'd almost forgotten what we were talking about." She put her hand to her forehead and tried to raise herself on the sofa again. "Bring me my cheque-book," she said languidly ; "there it is on my davenport. Put it here with pen and ink. Dear me ! how exhausted I am !"

"Don't put yourself out, dear," said Mrs. Carey, changing her tone directly there was a promise of money, "I'll arrange it all comfortable at your side here." She placed pen and ink and blotting-paper with the cheque-book by

the sofa. "Now dear," she said, "here they are."

"I'll rouse myself presently," said Mrs. Meadows, "but I feel so tired you can't think. What was it you were saying?"

"That you'd write a cheque for me," said Mrs. Carey anxiously.

"Yes, oh yes; what I meant was that I'd date it for Michaelmas for your rent, don't you see?"

"I don't see why you need date it so far off, Bella!"

"You'll spend it," she said very feebly. "Just wait a few minutes. I'm thoroughly exhausted. I'm knocked up."

"Here, smell this!" said Mrs. Carey, picking up the little jewelled bottle which had fallen from her hand. "Do you feel better now? When you've written the cheque you'd better go up-stairs

and lie down. The heat's been too much for you."

She took up a fan that lay on a table near and fanned her. Her face became very pale, all but the patch of colour on each cheek, which was no longer a diffused colour, but a network of little tiny red streaks.

"Bella!" said Mrs. Carey, alarmed, "you're faint! What can I do? Oh, what shall I do? Smell this!" She held the little bottle under her nose, but it did not make the slightest impression. The red network under the skin of the cheeks changed to a blue grey; the lips became blue, also the veins in the eyelids.

"Oh, dear me!" said Mrs. Carey, "whatever is the matter? Have some brandy, dear!"

There was no answer.

"Speak to me, Bella! what is it?"

Shall I get you some brandy? Oh dear, she's fainted right away!"

Mrs. Carey walked into the next room, which was only separated by heavy curtains, and went to the sideboard and poured out a small glass of brandy.

"Take this, dear," she said, pushing it between the blue lips. "You'll soon get better if you take this."

She poured it into her mouth, but it only returned and dripped on to the delicate sea-green dress that was so daintily trimmed with lace.

"Bella! Bella!" almost screamed Mrs. Carey. "Wake up! wake up!" She took her by the arm and shook her. "Is she dead? Impossible in those few minutes! What shall I do? Is she really dead? Bella!" She shook her again. Again she tried to pour brandy down her throat. Again

she tried, placing the smelling-bottle close to her nose. "Bella!" she shouted, "are you dead? Why don't you answer? Good gracious me! what shall I do?"

She turned to go across the room to the bell, but in doing so knocked over the little round table and upset the ink, and sent the couple of little piles of sovereigns and shillings spinning all round the room.

"There's the ink all over the carpet!" was the first thought that occurred to mind of the lodging-house keeper. She took up the inkstand, and rubbed the stain on the carpet with blotting-paper. Then she picked up the sovereigns one by one, and as she did so, she picked up her own senses also, and began to calculate what was the best thing to do.

"Was she really dead?" that was the question.

She went up again to the poor limp figure on the sofa and looked at the ashy face, and leant down to hear if there was the slightest sound of breathing. She felt the pulse and listened at the heart; but all was still. She pulled at the arm again, and the body showed no sign.

She turned to the table and took up all the money and tied it in her handkerchief and put it in her pocket. Then she took up the cheques which were pinned to the bills, and considered for a moment.

“No,” she said to herself, “that wouldn’t do,” and she put them down again. She kept her eye on *the figure* all the time, fearful it might come to life again. Then she went once more to see if there were any sign of life. But no—all was still.

“Scissors!” she muttered to herself,

“and her work-basket isn’t here.” She rang the bell, and went outside the door. “Just bring my scissors up from my work-box,” she said to the woman who appeared. “I’ll wait here for them, for Mrs. Meadows is very poorly, and doesn’t want anyone running in and out.”

A sudden thought seemed to strike her as she stood there waiting for the scissors. She opened her handkerchief and took out six of the sovereigns.

“There!” she said when the woman appeared, “just give that to Parker, and say Mrs. Meadows wishes her to go at once.”

She went back into the room, turning the key as quietly as possible. Then she passed through the curtains and fastened the door in the other room, which had been used as a dining-room for Mrs. Meadows.

Then she walked back again to the figure on the couch, moving about all the time on tiptoe as though she were in the presence of a sleeper. Once more she made various experiments to see if any life were left ; but the figure suffered rough treatment without showing the least sign of feeling. Then she moved the dress aside, taking up the jewelled smelling-bottle which was lying on the dead woman's lap, and putting it in her own pocket as though it were an "unconsidered trifle" that might as well find an owner. Her hands travelled cautiously under the dress till the stays were found. For a moment Mrs. Carey started back in horror, for the body under the stays was still warm. She hesitated a moment.

Could it be possible that she was not dead after all? But no! Surely she would have shown signs of life before

this if any were left. She went back again to the stays, pushing her hand round about them till something crackled under her fingers. Then she took the scissors and with some little difficulty cut away a bit of linen that was sewn on, and drew out a parcel of bank notes. This she rolled up and hurriedly thrust into her pocket without stopping to look how much it represented.

She re-arranged the dress, and tried to place the body in a natural attitude, for with her various manipulations it looked rather a pitiable sight.

“There!” she muttered, glancing round to see if anything else needed looking after. Thrown on a chair were the bonnet and mantle which the dead woman had worn when out for her drive; and the avaricious eyes caught sight of a beautiful bit of jewellery, which had

fastened the mantle, carelessly stuck in it, and hanging down over the side of the chair. It was a stone cameo, encircled with pearls, a more costly thing than at first sight it appeared to be.

“I might as well have it,” thought the greedy creature. “It will be forgotten in the confusion.”

With trembling fingers she took it out and put it in her pocket with the other spoils. Then she rang the bell, and waited at the door for an answer,

“Go at once to Dr. Jackson,” she said to her own servant who appeared, “and say I want to see him as quick as ever he can come about a lady who is taken ill; and then go on to Dr. Harley at this address,” handing a bit of paper, “and say Mrs. Meadows is

very bad indeed, and wishes to see him.
Is Parker gone?"

"Just a-going, ma'am."

"That's right. Don't lose any time,
as Mrs. Meadows is very ill."

CHAPTER IX.

“SO you intend to have a governess for her?”

“Yes, a governess, or companion, or something of that sort. It must be an educated woman, I mean a really clever woman, and not too young, because don’t you see, Ackerman, the girl knows a little.”

“Knows a little, Meadows! A great deal I should say! More than most ladies.”

“I think Broderick and I have succeeded pretty well with her in some respects, but I begin to feel the want of a woman’s help now.”

“I don’t see why you should. No girl could be better brought up than she is. I would not wish a better training for my own daughter. She does you credit, Meadows, and Broderick too!”

“I’m glad you think so! She has been my chief thought and care, and indeed happiness, since the unlucky day I made that wretched mistake. She’s been a dear good child, never giving me any trouble till now; and now I can hardly say she gives trouble. It might be called her misfortune, and not her fault, that she’s very attractive both in person and manner; and of course, Ackerman, you must see that she is reaching that period of her life when—when—in fact, that she’ll be much admired by the men.”

“Do you think so? She seems a child to me still.”

The Squire looked at his companion

searchingly. They were standing in the large bay-window in the drawing-room of Overton Hall waiting for the second dinner-bell on Pet's birthday. Pet was later than usual, because a new dress, put on in honour of the occasion, refused to arrange itself easily on her figure.

"Does she?" said the Squire somewhat incredulously. "I'm glad of that. I have been rather afraid that her familiar ways, which are really the outcome of affection on her part, might be taken as meaning something more—might be mistaken in fact."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, what I should say perhaps is, that while she is offering friendship it might be mistaken for love; at any rate, a man might easily fall in love with her while she only regarded him as a friend or relation."

The Squire watched Mr. Ackerman's face earnestly as he said this.

"Oh, I think not! She is so frank and open, and in fact childish!"

"She is always harping on that question of relationship."

"Yes?" said Ackerman, eagerly.

"You know how she calls you 'grandpa' in fun!"

"Yes; dear child!"

"And I'm sure you'll not be offended when I tell you that she says she wishes you were her grandfather, or uncle, or some relation."

"Does she, really?"

"Yes; and of course as I point out to her, it's quite ridiculous, for I don't suppose you're much older than Broderick or myself, if at all."

"But a few years."

"Of course it would make no difference so far as my consent is concerned, if

Pet liked to marry a man older than herself, if he was worthy of her. Do you see, Ackerman?"

"I should have thought the subject of marriage had never entered her head."

"Well, I may mention to you in confidence, for I'm sure Broderick wouldn't mind your knowing it, that the dear old boy fell in love with his pupil."

"Indeed!" said Ackerman, starting, and turning as pale as his bronzed skin would allow.

"Now I have him," said the Squire to himself. "I thought I should get at the truth somehow. I'm sure he loves her."

"I gave him permission to ask her to marry him."

"And she accepted?"

"No; she loved him only as a relation, she said."

“Dear me!” said Ackerman. “I see now what you meant. Of course she has regarded Broderick as a relation all this time, and he has fallen in love. How strange it is that magnetic influence which the sexes exercise over one another! I hope our friend will recover from his wound.”

“I was astonished at his being wounded at all. He’s such a dear old, steady-going fellow.”

“Yes; the steady-going ones are sometimes soonest caught. Ah!” he sighed, turning round to the window so that the slanting sunlight caught his face and showed its melancholy expression, “what a strange thing love is! I suppose most of us get bitten once in a life-time! indeed I doubt if the real thing ever comes twice. With our friend Broderick it is probably only a case of propinquity.

Remove the object, and he'll soon be cured."

"I hope it's nothing worse! Poor dear old Bart!"

"But when it's the real thing not even death can obliterate it from the mind," said Ackerman with energy.

"You are right," said the Squire, still watching him closely, and wondering whether the fire that had suddenly come into the deep-set blue eyes was called up by thoughts of Pet.

"That man could love as fiercely as I do myself," he thought.

"I have myself experienced the magnetic influence of a woman with whom I was, by force of circumstances, thrown into contact. I wanted sympathy at the time, and I looked to her as I would have looked to an elder sister, or even a mother, though there were but a few years between us. But somehow a

woman seems so much older than a man."

"Yes; women seem to be grown up when boys are still being flogged at school."

"If any man had told me I should fall in love with that woman when I first knew her, I should have laughed him to scorn."

"And yet you did?"

"Yes; I did; if the word love can be applied in such a case. It was simply a case of propinquity, as I just now remarked. I looked to her as a sort of comforter, a mother in fact; but when two persons of opposite sex attempt to make up a relationship between themselves, whether it be as a mother and son, or father and daughter, or brother and sister, it always ends with the same result."

The Squire almost groaned aloud.

“Yes,” he thought, “you understand the feeling very well. We are both experiencing it at this moment. Father and grandfather indeed! I only wish I was in the place of the supposed grandfather!”

“Cousin Bart not come yet?” said Pet, appearing suddenly, looking radiant in her new gown. “Oh, dear! I hope he’s not called out to a death-bed or anything of that sort! I’ve been expecting the second bell every minute, and felt quite ashamed of being so late. This bothering gown wouldn’t go right. Do you like it, papa?”

She went and stood in the bay-window to be admired by the two men who were only too ready to admire.

“Very pretty indeed, my dear,” said Ackerman in the most grandfatherly way. “You really look quite a nice little

girl, and your father ought to be proud of you !”

“There’s a dear grandpa,” said Pet, going up and taking his arm, and leaning on it. “That unkind papa won’t say a word ! I believe he thinks I grow uglier every day. He used to be always saying pretty things to me once.”

“Don’t be so silly, Pet,” said the Squire. “You’re quite spoilt, I declare you are, between us all. There’s Bart falls down and worships you instead of putting you in the corner when you don’t know your lessons ; and now there’s Ackerman taking care of you as if you were the most precious thing on the face of the earth.”

“Well, so I am to you, pupsy, ain’t I ?” she said, pulling at his watch-chain. “I know I used to be !”

“But I shall have to turn severe if these fellows will insist on spoiling you.”

"But you won't be severe on my birthday, will you, darling? We're going to have all the day nice this year, aren't we? We've spent it just like last year, you know, grandpa, only there was such a funny ending to it."

"Don't talk of that, Pet," said the Squire.

"Now this year," she went on, "we are going to have a beautiful ending—beautiful for me, because I've got the three people I love best in the world with me. Papa and grandpa and Cousin Bart. At least I hope he's coming, and that our lovely evening is not going to be spoilt by somebody who's taken ill. They needn't get taken ill at such a moment as this. Oh! here he comes! and looking so hurried! I suppose something kept him."

The parson came in apologising that some business had detained him, and

they all went at once into the dining-room, for the bell had rung soon after Pet appeared.

The soup was just removed when a telegram for the Squire was brought in.

“Dear me!” he said; “who’s telegraphing to me! Perhaps it’s Fanny to say she’s coming at once.”

Telegrams were not frequent at the Hall, as the office was some miles away.

“I said any day next week, papa, when I wrote yesterday.”

“We’ll see what she says,” said the Squire, opening the envelope. “‘From Mrs. Carey——’” began the Squire; but as he saw the contents he stopped, and sat with eyes fixed on the bit of pink paper.

“Mrs. Carey!” said Pet, recognising the familiar name. “Papa! what’s the

matter? Is it anything dreadful?" for she noticed how the colour had left his face.

He did not answer, but kept his eyes on the paper.

"Papa! papa! what is it?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing!" said the Squire suddenly, recovering himself. "I beg pardon, Ackerman, have you got what you like? I'm forgetting you."

"I hope it isn't bad news, Thorn," said the parson. "I'm sure Ackerman will excuse you if anything's upset you."

Mr. Broderick knew his cousin's face so well that he was sure something of very great importance had happened. If Thornton Meadows had stopped to consider whether it was bad or good news, he could only have decided it was good. But it had come so

suddenly on him that he couldn't think at all.

"If you'll excuse me a minute," he said, "I'll be back again."

But before he could reach his own room, he suddenly remembered Pet might be anxious. That brought him to his senses at once. What should he tell her? It would never do to let her know the truth in the presence of other people, because it might embarrass her. He returned to the dining-room.

"Don't look so anxious, Pet. Your mother is ill, and I must just run up to town to see her. There is no cause for alarm. Make your mind easy. Unfortunately there will be no train to bring me back to-night; in fact there's only one that will take me, so I mustn't lose it. I wish it wasn't Saturday night, Bart,

and you might have run up with me."

The old sense of wanting some one to share his trouble came over him more than ever now; for this was a particularly disagreeable mission he had to fulfil.

"I wish I could have gone with you, Thorn; I might have offered some religious comfort to the poor sick lady; but I hope she is well cared for."

"She is at any rate with friends, for I know she constantly corresponded with this Mrs. Carey, and mentioned her frequently."

"Yes, papa, I know she's a very old friend, because we used to live with her; but I can't remember what she was like."

"I'll tell you what it is, Bart! If Ackerman won't mind being left with

Pet, I'll ask you to drive down with me to the station; for it's a miserable drive, especially when one isn't going on a very pleasant errand."

"Don't trouble about me," said Ackerman.

"I shall trust to Pet to take care of you; she can be capital company when she likes."

"I could not wish for better."

"Yes, I'll take care of grandpa."

"Do make a good dinner before you start, Thorn," said the parson, seeing that his cousin only played with his knife and fork.

"This sort of thing coming at dinner time upsets one's digestion," he said. "I feel that what I eat now would do me no good. I'd much better leave it alone. In fact I'll go and make ready and give the order for the carriage, if you'll excuse me. There's

plenty of time, Bart; don't you hurry. I'll let you know when I'm prepared to start."

The Squire left the room, and the rest of the party found it difficult to keep up conversation after this. Pet looked anxious, but her anxiety was not for her mother. She knew how unpleasant it would be for her father to meet her mother again, and she could guess by his manner and tone of voice what he was suffering. Greatly as she disliked the idea of seeing Mrs. Meadows again, she would willingly have gone with her father to comfort him if he would only allow her. But he was as anxious to save her from annoyance as she was to save him.

Ackerman looked nervous and unsettled, and only made a pretence of going on with his dinner, but Pet and the parson were too much occupied

with their own feelings to notice this.

Poor Broderick was in the unhappy state of mind of a man who had been told to regard the girl he loves simply as a friend. He was bringing all his Christianity to bear on his misfortune; but still it did not prevent him from letting a fierce pang of jealousy shoot through his heart at the prospect of leaving Pet to enjoy the evening all alone with a man whom he could only regard as his rival.

The dessert was on the table when the Squire came in and announced that it was time to start.

“Oh, papa, dear!” said Pet, getting up, “do come back as soon as you can. What trains shall I send down to to-morrow?”

“You see there are so few to-morrow. Better send to the 2.20; but if I don’t

come by that you may be sure I'm kept, and then I'll telegraph early on Monday morning."

"Oh, papa! Monday! What a long time!"

"It will soon pass, little one. I wish Fanny had been here to take care of you. Good-bye!"

Ackerman watched them as they kissed at parting, and the Squire caught the look of envy on his face—a look that was fixed on his mind for many a day after. Full of the contents of the telegram as his mind was, yet this little incident disturbed him. He felt a mad jealousy at his heart. He knew that not only had Ackerman a chance of marrying Pet if she would have him, but that it was his duty to forward his chances. He consoled himself continually with the thought that the girl at present did

not seem likely to fall in love, and that she was more attached to himself than anyone. But then again he was tormented with the knowledge that love must come in time.

“Bart!” he said, as the carriage started, “it’s worse than I told you. She’s dead!”

“Good heavens, Thorn! How sudden!”

“Here’s the telegram.”

“Dear me!” said the parson, looking at it, “I hope she was prepared, poor soul!”

“I don’t believe she had a soul, so it’s not of much consequence.”

“Thorn, Thorn, how can you? she’s dead now, poor creature! let us say the best we can of her.”

“But her being dead don’t cancel the evil she has done. She has made a wreck of my life, that is very certain.”

“Yes, Thorn! But now it has pleased God to take her you can shape your life afresh. You are still young.”

“In years, perhaps! But what use is my youth to me now? I should like to stamp it out. There is nothing in life for me except to see Pet married.”

“What an odd fellow you are, Thorn! A minute ago when you told me of the death of that poor soul, I could not help experiencing just a slight sensation of relief—for your sake, you know—though it ill becomes me to rejoice over the death of a fellow-creature. But I could not help it, Thorn, for it seemed to me that it had pleased God to take away a great burden from you. But so far from regarding the matter in that light yourself, you are complaining as though you had some new trouble. Per-

haps you begin to have some little remorse now she's gone, and wish her back."

"God forbid!"

"I can't think what's come over you of late, Thorn! You were just like your old self again when she went away last year—why, it was this very day, wasn't it?—and now you seem more miserable than when she was here. What's the matter with you? I could understand it if you had suffered such a misfortune as I have. You don't know what it is, old boy, to fight against a passionate feeling as I have done for some time past; to see the girl you love day after day and treat her as merely a friend, or rather one of the family. I tell myself I'm an old fool; but I feel it all the same, Thorn."

"Poor Bart! I'm sure you need not blame yourself. I can quite understand

your feeling. But the child is not to blame——”

“Oh, no, no! I must seem quite an old fogey to her.”

“No, I don’t suppose it’s that; but you see she has no relations, and she naturally clings to us.”

“Yes, and I blame myself so much for having allowed her to know that I entertained any other feeling for her than that of a relation. It was quite wicked of me, Thorn, that it was; and I cannot forgive myself. It would only be a proper punishment if I went away out of her sight altogether.”

“We couldn’t spare you, Bart! I should go to the dogs if you didn’t look after me.”

“Thorn! You are a great deal cleverer than I am! Why do you say that? You know that I owe everything to you. If it pleases God to make me of any com-

fort to you, I'm sure it is to show you that true consolation is only to be found in the Christian religion."

"Bother the religion, Bart! Miss Green professes it as well as you. It's not for your religion I love you, but for yourself."

"I'm sure I'm only a very unworthy man after all my efforts, and have to fight with more sins and weaknesses than you know of; but if there is any good in me it is strengthened by my belief in——"

"Nonsense, old boy! The good was born in you, and if you'd happened to be a Jew, Turk, infidel, heretic, or any of the other fellows you are kind enough to pray for—on Good Friday, is it?—you'd have had the same good heart. I don't say your Christian religion isn't the most humanising one, and if we must have a superstition of some sort, by all

means let us have it; but don't you persuade yourself that the religion itself makes you what you are. Why doesn't it turn Sophia Green into a good woman? How could my—I mean that poor wretch that is dead and gone—go to church Sunday after Sunday and confess her sins, and pray for forgiveness, and offer up her thanksgivings, and listen to your pretty little sermons, and then come home and make the place a hell upon earth for her husband and daughter?"

"I think poor Miss Green is good according to her lights."

"Her lights! The light of the Christian religion! eh, Bart?"

"Well, I mean her capabilities."

"Just so! You come round to what I said at first. Had she been a Jew, Turk, infidel, or heretic, as you Christians politely name the rest of the world,

she would have been a backbiting, mischief-making woman all the same. Were Christ himself to come on earth, I don't think he could make a good woman out of such material."

"You forget, Thorn, that even the Mary Magdalen was not beneath his notice."

"Ah! but she may have had some noble qualities in her, poor thing! and probably had. She had at least a reverence for the Great Master, whereas, if any great teacher came to our village, Miss Green would want to know his history, and whether he quarrelled with his wife, or paid his washerwoman. That woman does more harm in the name of religion than a dozen others who profess no religion at all."

"But I don't see, Thorn, why you should let a few black sheep condemn a whole flock. I confess that Miss Green has her infirmities——"

“Infirmities indeed! Vices I should say.”

“We’ll not be too severe. She certainly is a little wanting in Christian charity. But I think, Thorn, you are unnecessarily cynical on the question of religion, perhaps because your aunt vexed you a great deal with it when you were a boy.”

“I suppose that’s it! She’s another good Christian, isn’t she, old boy?”

“Well, Thorn, we must put the best construction we can on people’s actions. I wonder whether she’d come to the Hall again now that Mrs. Meadows is dead?”

“We could do very well without her.”

“Poor Miss Meadows! She’d be so much happier if she would enlarge her interests, and try to see beyond the narrow circle she has prescribed for herself.”

“Happier, Bart? You’re quite mistaken! Those narrow-minded people are happy enough. It is the large-minded ones who are melancholy: those who can see just enough to find out how much there is that never can be seen. My aunt may be called a happy woman. She has led a life that suits her, bullying and badgering everybody about her, and scraping and saving her money with the avarice of a miser: she’ll probably live several more years in the same happy way, and then die in the orthodox fashion, and have a grand funeral, which you may depend on it she has arranged for in her will; and a marble tablet on the walls of your church, Bart, which will remind you every Sunday of her many virtues.”

“Will Mrs. Meadows be buried here, Thorn?”

“No, certainly not. The sooner that

little episode is dropped out of the family history, the better. In fact I think I ought to be dropped out of it myself, Bart, and be mentioned hereafter only with bated breath, like Robert the Radical. I have brought nothing but disgrace on the family."

"Thorn, don't talk in that wretched way! It was your own goodness of heart that brought your misfortune on you. And you did your duty by her, Thorn! No one can say you didn't. I hope, as it has pleased God to take her, that you may now get fresh hope, and——"

"Marry again, I suppose?"

"Considering your position, Thorn, I think you should."

"No, I never shall, Bart. My life's broken up."

"It seems to me you have before you a life which most men might envy.

You are not even troubled with land, as some of our neighbours are. You have everything to make you happy—amongst other things the privilege of bestowing gifts on your fellow-creatures; a privilege not to be despised, by any means, Thorn.”

“And I should despise it less if you’d take more, old boy. Dash it all, Bart, here we are; I wish you were coming. I quite dread it. It’s such a ghastly sort of business, going to look after a dead woman that you have hated.”

“But you must forget your hatred now, Thorn; you must think of her only with kindness; think of her as the mother of that dear girl.”

“Of course you won’t tell her about it,” said the Squire, suddenly recalled to a remembrance of Pet. “Leave it to me.”

"Of course."

"You can tell Ackerman, in confidence, you know, only it won't do to let it be known generally till I have broken it to Pet."

"I don't suppose she'll feel it very much, poor girl."

"No, not in the usual sense. But don't you see, Bart, the child frets about her mother. She doesn't say much to me, but I know from little remarks what she feels about it. She thinks it's her duty to love her, and reproaches herself for not having gone away with her. When she hears this I'm afraid she'll make herself miserable with the idea that she has not done what she should; so I would rather tell her about it myself."

They left the carriage and went into the station, Keeley looking all he had in his heart as his master gave him directions for meeting him.

“God bless him and take care of him!” muttered the faithful old coachman as the Squire turned away. He had heard only that Mrs. Meadows was very ill; and such was his dread of her, and his belief in the satanic power he attributed to her, that as he said to “Liz” when he returned he hoped “as Squire would turn up all right again, but there was no knowing when he got into *her* clutches, in a strange place too.”

“God bless you, Thorn! and bring you back safe to us!” said the parson, unconscious that he was echoing Keeley, as the Squire got into the railway carriage.

CHAPTER X.

“ **M**RS. CAREY ?” said the Squire, rising from the sofa on which his dead wife had been lying a few hours before.

“ Yes,” said Mrs. Carey, with her best bow and a sad smile, advancing to meet the Squire. “ I’m *so* glad you have come. It was *so* sad, and *so* sudden ! I really hardly know where I am. I cannot get over it. Pray be seated.”

She appeared to find some difficulty in articulation, and an occasional sob broke her speech.

“ I’m sure you’ll excuse me, Mr.

Meadows, but,"—sobbing—" she was my dearest friend—we were like two sisters—and—and it's a shocking blow to me—I can't get over it—I can't."

"It happened last night you say?"

"Yesterday evening. She'd been out for her drive, poor dear! and had been busy with settling little things ready for her journey, for she was going abroad for a change, you know——"

"Yes, madam!"

"And she came home a little tired, poor dear Bella! I really can't bear to think of it——"

"Yes."

"And she said to me, she says, Laura dear, I think I'll have a cup of tea——"

"Don't trouble yourself with small detail, madam. The simple facts will do."

"Yes, I'm sure you'd rather be spared all the heartrending story, Mr. Meadows,

for it is indeed heartrending, and I hardly know how to bring myself to talk about it."

"At what hour did it take place?"

"Well, I could hardly tell exactly, for I was that grieved, Mr. Meadows, I hardly knew what I was doing. 'Run at once for Dr. Jackson and Dr. Harley,' I said to Jane, for Bella's own maid, you know, had been dismissed but an hour before. Dr. Harley, you know, Mr. Meadows, has been attending Bella, but as I know he's only at home of mornings and goes his rounds of afternoons, I sent for my own medical man, Dr. Jackson, who is a most attentive man I can assure you, and I have full confidence in him."

"Pray do not unnecessarily vex yourself with all this. I can imagine it must be very painful to your feelings. Tell me just the bare facts."

“You’re very kind, Mr. Meadows. Poor Bella always did say you’d been the kindest of husbands; and I’m sure I was sorry enough when I heard of the very unfortunate circumstances which—”

“Yes, yes,” said the Squire, rather impatiently.

“But of course bygones are bygones when the poor dear creature is lying dead.”

“What did the doctors say?”

“Jackson, he came first, and directly he looked at her he said she was dead. She was lying there, poor dear, on that sofa, just where you sit—” the Squire started and seemed very uncomfortable—“and her poor face was all turned blue, just where it used to be red, for she had a lovely colour you know, had Bella, as I often used to say to her, where—”

“Yes,” said the Squire getting up and standing on the hearthrug with his back to the chimney-piece. “And what did the doctor say it was?”

“Oh, the heart! the heart, poor thing! and there must be an inquest, he says. Goodness gracious, doctor, says I, you don’t mean to say they’ll hold a coroner’s inquest over the poor dear thing? Well, he says, Mrs. Carey, it’s a sudden death, and I wasn’t attending her. Oh, dear me! I says, what a thing it’ll be to have—”

“And is there to be an inquest?” asked the Squire anxiously.

“Well, Mr. Meadows, when Dr. Jackson said that, I said we’d better hear what Dr. Harley says. ‘What’s Dr. Harley to do with it,’ he says. ‘Why, Dr. Jackson,’ I said, ‘he’s been attending on her.’ ‘Oh,’ says Dr. Jackson, ‘then of course he’s the one to be consulted. I must see him.’”

“Yes ! and how is it settled ?”

“Well, Dr. Harley, he didn’t come in till quite late, and all this time there was the poor soul lying there on that sofa quite dead, and we didn’t like to move her, you know, till Dr. Harley came ; and when he did he said it was the heart, and that he wasn’t surprised, as he’d examined her two months before, and knew she might go off like this at any moment.”

“Did she know this herself ?”

“I really cannot say. If she did she would never have told me, for I was her dearest friend, you know, Mr. Meadows, we have been friends for many years. Poor dear Bella !” She applied one of her “dearest friend’s” cambric handkerchiefs to her eyes at this moment.

“Then there is not to be an inquest ?”

“No ; I’m thankful to say not. Dr.

Harley said there was no difficulty about his giving a certificate of her death, as he had attended her. You'll come up and see her, Mr. Meadows, of course."

"No, thank you, I'd rather not. I can do her no good now."

"Not see her?"

"No; I would rather not."

"She looks so nice now, poor dear, you really ought to look at her."

"The dead body of a person is the mere husk or shell. I have no curiosity in such matters."

"And she's all laid out so nice too, poor dear!"

"I suppose nothing has been done about the funeral yet?"

"No, Mr. Meadows, I thought that should be left to you, as you'd like her buried down there perhaps."

"No; there's no occasion for that; I'll give orders about it myself, and acquaint

you with the arrangements. You say you were her chief friend?"

"Yes; dear Bella and I were like sisters."

"Do you know anything of her relations?"

"No; she was an only child, she informed me, and I never heard mention of any relations."

"Perhaps you knew her first husband?"

"Oh, yes! very well indeed! It was through him I knew her, poor dear!"

"Were none of his relations interested in her?"

"I never heard of any of them."

"Could you oblige me with any information concerning Mr. Carstairs, or Captain Carstairs as I have generally heard him called. I do not ask from curiosity, but for the sake of his young

daughter, who would be glad to meet with any of the family."

"Well, you see, Mr. Meadows, it was rather an unfortunate piece of business altogether; they didn't get on well by any means; and the Captain he had a temper, and Bella, so had she, and there were fine goings on between them sometimes, and many's the day I've made peace between them."

"Was it a commission in the army or navy he held?"

"That I couldn't say."

"But surely you would hear him talk of his occupation?"

"I'm afraid he was what they call a fast man, Mr. Meadows, and didn't trouble himself about occupation at all unless it was about cards or billiards or such-like."

"Was he in good circumstances?"

"Sometimes he had a heap of money,

and sometimes would borrow a few shillings from me, and hard enough it was to lend at times. He was a fine handsome man too, with such eyes as I never saw, but there was no holding the Captain in, Mr. Meadows, that there wasn't. Poor Bella she tried hard with him; sometimes she scolded him, and then he'd go straight out and not come back for a month perhaps, and then she'd coax him, but nothing would do; he would have his own way."

"You remember their little girl?"

"Yes, bless her heart, and a good father you've been to her, I hear!"

"Do you know where she was born?"

"No, I couldn't say."

"How old was she when you first knew her?"

"Oh, a little thing about that high," pointing to the level of a table.

“Can you recall what year it was?”

“Ah, now, Mr. Meadows, you puzzle me, for I never could remember figures.”

“But you could probably tell me where they were married?”

“Well, Mr. Meadows, I can tell you something about that which you’d rather not hear, but you may trust me to keep the secret as close as death. No one else knows it, and I’m sure I would not hurt your feelings or the young lady’s by ever revealing what I know.”

“Yes, what is it?” said the Squire getting impatient.

“Well, poor Bella you know—but as I said I’m sure she didn’t deserve—”

“Yes—what is this secret?”

“It really is such a delicate matter, Mr. Meadows, that I find a great difficulty in bringing myself to speak of it, especially as it concerns the honour of

my poor dear friend who is now lying there a corpse—”

“Yes, madam, I respect your feelings ; but it were best said quickly if ’tis unpleasant. Was there anything wrong about the marriage?”

“It was no marriage, Mr. Meadows.”

“No marriage ! How so ?” said the Squire in an astonished tone.

“There was no ceremony. Poor dear Bella used—”

“Do you mean to say that Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs were never married at all, and that their child is illegitimate?”

“They were never married. Poor Bella used to try and deceive me at first, but Carstairs, he was a violent fellow, and when he was in a passion he wouldn’t mind what he called people, and he would say things to poor Bella that awful that I wonder how she could

have stuck to him! I wouldn't, I know. If a man was to treat me as—"

"And he actually said before you that they were not married?"

"Yes; he'd call her dreadful names, that I couldn't repeat to you, Mr. Meadows, and the child too. He always called that poor child by a shocking word when he was angry, which showed she was base born—"

"What a scoundrel!"

"He was! and yet he was as nice a looking man, and as good as gold when he liked. And when he got his pockets full he was for spending his money like a prince—"

"And you're sure they were never married?"

"As sure as I can be, Mr. Meadows. He's said so before me a thousand times, I might say, and threatened to leave her whenever she vexed him and—"

“What became of him?”

“He left her at last for good, and said he was going to Australia, and she must do the best she could, and she’d have starved if it hadn’t been for me, poor soul, for I kept her and kept her while she tried to find something to do, and she couldn’t find anything for months, and there was the child as well as the mother, you know, and—”

Mrs. Carey’s sentences always threatened to run on for ever, unless the Squire stopped her. At first he felt it was rude to interrupt a lady, but he soon discovered there would be no chance of his getting the information he wanted unless he did.

“Yes, yes, it must have been sad for them,” he said shuddering to think what his beloved Pet had gone through. “But although, as you say, Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs were not married, they lived

reputedly as man and wife, I suppose. They had merely omitted the ceremony?"

"You can hardly call it respectable, Mr. Meadows, for people to live together who are not married? I'm sure I wouldn't have taken them in if I'd have known it. I was always in a terrible fear in case my lodgers should get to know—"

"It's a mere matter of opinion," said the Squire carelessly. "I should not condemn such a thing myself, though I think the laws of the country should be respected however foolish they may be. Putting aside your opinion, madam, or your prejudice, should you say that Mr. and Mrs. Carstairs lived in all respects as husband and wife?"

"You see the Captain, he spent so much time away that I can hardly say. I think poor Bella was very fond of him, but

I think he was rather a gay one after the women, for they all used to run after him, and I had two women coming to inquire after him after he was gone, which was very awkward for me with a respectable house and all, but as I told Bella——”

“A lodging-house I think you mentioned.”

“Yes, ever since my poor dear husband was taken from me I have been obliged to let apartments, and I’m very particular about respectability, but I wasn’t going to turn out the poor thing when she was starving, and the poor child, too——”

“It was very kind of you, madam, I’m sure.”

“And Bella always said, poor dear, she’d make it up to me when she could, and I’m sure she’s tried to, and she promised she’d remember me in her will, and leave me all her clothes and things——”

“Has she made a will?”

“That I don’t know, but that was her wishes, as she only said to me yesterday—”

“You need not fear, madam. If no will is found you may keep her things. I don’t want them.”

“But her jewellery, Mr. Meadows? Wouldn’t her daughter want it?”

“No; Miss Meadows will not require anything.”

Mrs. Carey tried to hide the joy she felt, and again had recourse to the cambric handkerchief.

“You have never heard anything more of Carstairs?” went on the Squire.

“No, never. I believe he really went away from London, but I can’t say where he went. If he’d heard of poor Bella’s marriage with you, I believe he’d have tried to get money out of her; and she never told me that he did; he was capable of anything, was the Captain.”

“Do you suppose he’d come to you if he came back?”

“Well, I don’t know if he’d find me out. You see I didn’t live here then; I’ve moved twice since then; I wanted to get into a more genteel neighbourhood. This is so very genteel, you know, Mr. Meadows, we have all the titled people about here, and I’ve had one lady of title myself in my first floor, and she paid me four——”

“And was your friend lodging here or visiting you?”

“What, poor dear Bella? Oh, she’d got first and second floor and her own maid; and, poor thing, she’d been here nearly three months, and just before she died she was settling up, you know, and she said to me, ‘Laura,’ she said, ‘just get my cheque-book and put it on the little table here, because I feel too tired to sit at the davenport,’ and I put it all for

her just as you see—there it is,” pointing to the little table, “and here’s the mark where I upset the ink when I saw the poor dear fainting, and quite spoiled the carpet, you see ; and she was just about to take up the pen to write out a cheque for me to pay my account, you know, when she fell back, and I was that frightened, I knocked over the table, and don’t know what I did.”

“ And she died then ? ”

“ Well, I can’t say when she died, but she never recovered to write the cheque. She had written these for the tradespeople, here they are all, you see, so neat ! poor dear Bella, she was always neat ! And then there were a few more that she asked me to pay, and said she would include the money in the cheque for me, as she generally did, you know.”

“ So you have not been paid, am I to understand ? ”

“No, I have not been paid; and being a little short, for it’s a hard life this, Mr. Meadows, it wants a good capital, it does, to do the thing well, and wanting little sums to pay out as there always are on these sad occasions, you know, I went round to the bankers this morning, for they know me, as I have often gone and changed a cheque for poor dear Bella, and I said to them, I said, Mrs. Meadows has died suddenly just as she was making out a cheque for expenses, and I’m pushed for a little money, perhaps you’ll advance a little from her account; but they wouldn’t do it, they said I must apply to you.”

“That shall be made right at once. Was there no loose money in her purse?”

“Just a little, I don’t know whether there’s any amongst her luggage, but I think she was just going to make out a

cheque for her own expenses, and get me to go to the bank to change it. You see she'd been out all the afternoon buying the things she wanted, and had used up her money, I suppose, and poor dear she was always very particular to make up her accounts, and——”

“ Pray do not trouble yourself further, madam. Will you mention what sum is due to you, and I will write it out at once ?”

“ Well, there was five weeks, I think ; it was at——”

“ I will not waste your time on minute calculations ; just tell me what sum will repay you for your trouble, and for what you have already disbursed ?”

“ I can hardly find out at a moment's notice how much it is. Am I to include these bills ?”

“ No, send all bills of every sort to me, if you please. I meant merely

what is due to you. Will fifty cover it?"

"I really don't feel quite sure, for——"

"At any rate a hundred will, I suppose."

"Oh, yes!" said the avaricious woman quickly; but in a moment she had regretted she did not try for more.

He sat down at the little table and wrote a cheque for a hundred pounds, and handed it to her.

"You can get that changed directly the bank opens on Monday morning. I think, madam, I need detain you no longer. I will give orders for the funeral, and a gentleman will call on Monday on my behalf to see that everything is right, and to him you may hand any papers left by your friend, also any bills."

"When do you propose looking over the things?"

“There is no occasion for me to see them. I have given you permission to take all there is. If there should be a will, you can give it to the gentleman who will represent me, or send it to him; and if it is made in favour of Miss Meadows or myself, you may rest assured that we shall never claim anything. All I ask is that if you should come across any papers relating to my stepdaughter in any way, or a certificate of marriage—”

“There was none, I’m sure. Poor Bella would have been too glad to show it me.”

“Then I’ll wish you good evening, madam.” The Squire bowed and did not appear to notice the rather dirty hand that was offered to him.

“Poor Pet!” he said to himself as he left the house. “What a horrible life for such a child! And illegitimate too! She shall never know it.”

CHAPTER XI.

IT was nearly midnight when Thornton Meadows reached his hotel. He went at once to his room, ordering some iced brandy and soda to be sent up to him. His reflections were anything but pleasant, as he sat thinking over the events of the evening. Only five hours before he had suddenly heard of the death of his wife ; but it seemed as if ages had passed since then. He was a free man once more—free to marry whom he chose ; but of what use was his freedom to him ? The one being in the world he really loved must ever remain to him as a daughter.

Well, it must be so, and he must bear it.

But what if her illegitimacy made a difference in the relationship between them! If she was really illegitimate, as this woman had averred, she was no relation to anyone in the world, not even to her mother, according to the law. Therefore she was not his stepdaughter. Couldn't he marry her, then? No: horrible thought! He had trained her to love him as a father, and it would be too great a revulsion of feeling for him to ask her to look upon him as a lover. Besides, she must then know of her illegitimacy. But what need that matter if she was under his protection? It might be a great shock to so sensitive a girl, especially as she hankered after the possession of blood relations.

He must suffer, that was evident, for Pet must not have the least thing to spoil her happiness if he could help it.

Poor girl! what a life she had led, and what wretched people she had been with in her childhood! What a scoundrel that Carstairs must have been! Some low billiard-player, gambling blackleg. Fancy that sweet, pure girl the child of such parents! It seemed almost impossible. Rather an odd person to own as a dearest friend that woman at the lodging-house. She was evidently anxious to make what capital she could out of the death of her friend. Fancy having married a woman of that sort! Can there be many women so wonderfully deceitful and plausible? However did she manage to pass so well in good society after living with such a dreadful set? How curiously adaptive women are! Whatever would Miss Green say, could she get an inkling of it? Perhaps if she hears where the death took place she'll make a point of calling to know particulars. Wouldn't she gloat

over it if she knew all? She'd soon let the whole county know that Pet was illegitimate. Can that lodging-house woman be trusted to keep it secret, as she promises? Perhaps she'll make it a means of extorting money. Better to pension her off than let Pet suffer.

Disease of the heart! She hardly seemed like a person who had it! And yet perhaps that accounted for her deliberate manner of speaking. After all a deficiency in circulation may have been the cause of her want of feeling. What a cold-blooded woman she was! How could she have lived in that wretched way with her grand notions! Nothing was too good for her at Overton. Imagine a woman who had lived with a blackleg in a lodging-house sitting at the head of the table at Overton. Genteel lodging-house indeed! What was the other one like? Aunt Arabella would have a fit if

she knew. It would be a blacker spot in the family history than ever poor Radical Robert brought on it.

The direct line of the family would die out now. That was at least better than that it should have been continued through such a woman. Aunt Arabella's prophecy would probably come true, for Francis Meadows, the heir-at-law, would use the property to pay his debts, and indulge his taste for fast life. The land was entailed, but that was not profitable, and would at any rate go very little way towards keeping up the Hall.

Perhaps that fellow Carstairs would be turning up and claiming Pet. Horrible idea! but as she's illegitimate he can scarcely claim her. Then he'll be wanting money to be quiet. That will probably mean another pension. Pleasant to have that sort of thing

continually hanging over one. That woman at the lodging-house might perhaps join in a conspiracy with Carstairs if he should happen to turn up; she seemed to admire him particularly. Why is it that men of this sort fascinate women?

Eager as Pet is to know her relations, she could hardly wish to see such a scoundrel! She mustn't see him. It would be too dreadful. It is to be hoped he's dead, or safe in the antipodes. What an unpleasant-looking creature that woman at the lodging-house was! Such a shifty eye! She'd do anything for money.

One would think there was nothing in blood after all for Pet to come of such parents. It seems so utterly impossible! Such were some of the thoughts that passed through Thornton Meadows's mind, as he sat up in his bedroom that July

night. The scene with Mrs. Carey in the "first floor," her irritating talk, her vulgar style, her description of the dead woman on the sofa, were all so vividly fixed on his mind that sleep was impossible. He looked about to see if there were anything to take off his attention, but found only a card containing the hotel rules, which he read mechanically over and over again, and a Bible which he opened more with a view to distract his thoughts than to seek consolation. He left the open Bible on the drawers, and paced up and down the room, every now and then stopping to read a few sentences.

"Poor dear old Bart!" he thought, I wish I could accept all this as implicitly as he does! I wonder why I can't! I believe Bart could get over any trouble between his Bible and his tobacco. What a lucky fellow! Even tobacco

won't help me now. Bart would say, pray to God. Fancy praying to God to help you not to love your stepdaughter; it would be too ridiculous. It would be an insult to Him."

It was broad daylight when Thornton Meadows at last got into bed. He had eaten nothing at dinner except soup, and had taken no food since, so he was thoroughly exhausted, and it is not to be wondered at that what sleep he did get was very much disturbed with visions of the dead woman and the lodging-house keeper, and horrible dreams of Pet being in difficulties from which he was unable to extricate her. He felt miserable enough when he awoke to a Sunday, that wretchedest of all days in London!

CHAPTER XII.

PARSON BRODERICK was a good deal disturbed in mind as he drove back alone on that July evening. His life had been in one sense uneventful. There were the youthful years at the Lincolnshire Rectory, which seemed to be impressed on his mind chiefly by the struggles with poverty. Then there were the happy college days with his cousin, when he seemed to come all at once into comfort and happiness. And now there had been more than ten years spent at Overton Rectory—years that could scarcely be said to have

brought him much trouble, except that his cousin's troubles were to him like his own.

He was now nearly thirty-six years old, and for the first time in his life he had really fallen in love. He had not, in his youth, been insensible to the charms of some of the girls in the neighbourhood of his own home. There were a couple of sisters, Ada and Edith Courtley, who were particular favourites, and concerning whose doings Fanny Broderick had always kept her brother well informed, thinking he took an interest in them. When Ada, the eldest, married, Bart Broderick certainly did feel sentimental for a short time: and sighed a little over the reflection that had he been better off he might have stood in the place of the fortunate man who had secured her.

But he had no deep feeling on the

matter. The younger sister, Edith, was but a girl of sixteen when he left Lincolnshire, and he had seen little of her since, though she was frequently mentioned in Fanny's letters, for she was that young lady's most particular friend. Fanny often joked her friend on the possibility of their some day becoming sisters-in-law, but Miss Edith Courtley did not allow this possibility to stand in the way of her looking elsewhere for a husband, as it was beginning to be generally understood that Bart Broderick was a confirmed bachelor. Had the parson been suddenly put in possession of an ample income, and thought of looking round about him for a suitable wife, he would probably have chosen Edith Courtley, now that her elder sister was married. But no such opportunity arose.

And now he had fallen truly and desperately in love with his pupil, and had

asked her and been refused. He was thinking over all this as he drove back from Abington Station. Thornton's troubles had always been his troubles; and the unhappy marriage had caused him almost as much misery as it did his cousin. But now he was free—free to make a fresh start in life; to marry again; to beget children who would come after him. He could now afford to give up the stepdaughter who had been everything to him. She would be nowhere when children of his own came into the world. Why couldn't she be spared?

Thus argued the parson with himself. Then he thought of that unlucky evening not a week ago when he asked the question and was refused. It was stupid of Thorn, he thought, to be so precipitate. Why not have waited a bit to give him time to lead up to it? What a difference

it would have made if he had waited till after this event that had just happened. Now he had no chance, and Ackerman had. It was good of Thorn, he thought, to give him leave to ask her; and it seemed as if the dear old boy would have liked the match; but then he gave Ackerman just as much encouragement, and anyone could see that Ackerman worships the ground she treads on.

"I'll get out here, Keeley," said the parson, as they reached the stable-gates. It was a dark night, for the moon was young, and the parson thought there was no need to take the horses to the front gates and up to the house, because the tall elms cast a deep shadow, and there was no gas nearer than at Abington.

"I'll go through this way," said the parson, waiting at the stable-gates while they were opened.

He was certainly not in his most

Christian mood. Human nature breaks out occasionally even with the best of us, and when a man is in love he is likely to be forgetful even of his dearest friend. Broderick admired Ackerman's character,—he could scarcely help admiring it; for the man was noble and brave and good and gentle. But he had a mad jealousy of him, and the events of the evening had increased it.

Why couldn't this have happened before he asked Pet to marry him? It would have made all the difference, because she need not have excused herself from leaving her father. Ackerman would now make way with her. For the last two hours he had been alone in her company, and—but what was that he saw in the path before him? A figure in white with something black encircling her shoulders! His arm round her! Then of course he is accepted.

The parson slunk back behind a bush to wrestle with his feelings. He was filled with a horrible envy. His heart beat wildly, and his whole frame trembled.

“What a mad fool I am!” he said, clenching his hands in his rage and passion. He peeped out from behind the bush, and saw them go in at the drawing-room window.

He remained for some minutes trying to conquer the mad feelings that had taken possession of him. At last when he was somewhat calmer he walked up to the house.

The drawing-room window stood open, and Pet lay back in an easy-chair playing with her fan, and evidently holding a most interesting conversation with Ackerman, to judge from their faces. The parson stepped, in trying to look as if nothing particular had happened.

“Here he is!” said Pet. What a time you’ve been! We counted on seeing you some time back, and walked up and down the drive looking out for you. Did papa get off all right?”

“Oh, yes!” said the parson, thinking to himself all the time what hypocrites women could be, and that he never could have believed it of Pet. She was as unconcerned as though Ackerman were only her grandfather in reality.

“Why, Cousin Bart! you look quite bad! What’s the matter? Is there anything wrong with papa?”

Oh, no! he got all right, in capital time.”

“But I believe there’s something else than what he said or you wouldn’t look like that. There’s something dreadful happened that’s upset him and you. Do tell me, Cousin Bart! I’m a woman now and can understand

things. Perhaps papa was afraid to tell me," she said, imploringly.

"No, no! I can assure you there's nothing. I'm all right, but—but—I feel dazed coming in from the darkness to the light suddenly. It's such a dark night, and the trees here make it worse. There's nothing to trouble yourself about."

"Getting up so hastily from dinner has perhaps upset you, Broderick. Let me prescribe a little brandy and soda," said Ackerman.

The brandy and soda were brought, and Ackerman tried to carry on a general conversation with the parson, without alluding to the Squire's absence in any way, because he saw that Pet was anxious.

"I think I had better go to bed, grandpa," said Pet. "I'm sure I haven't been good company for you, because I've been

thinking so much about papa having to go off in this dreadful way; but you'll forgive me, won't you?"

"I couldn't wish for better company, my dear."

"And don't you and Cousin Bart hurry, you know."

"Oh, I shall be glad to get to bed myself!" cried the parson, rising to go.

"And I," said Ackerman.

The two walked out together.

"I'll take your arm, Broderick, if you'll let me, for you know the way here on a dark night better than I do. These trees certainly make the place very black. That poor child is in a fever of anxiety about Meadows. I've been trying to console her."

The parson certainly felt at this moment to be in great want of some of that Christian grace for which he was so famous in the eyes of his old house-

keeper. He was almost savage with Ackerman as he linked his arm in his in that friendly way, as if nothing had happened. And then for the fellow to say innocently he had been trying to console her for her father's sudden departure. What a hypocrite ! Hadn't they both been consoling themselves, and probably not giving a thought to the Squire.

"Consoling her ! yes, you have indeed !" thought the parson, savagely.

"Poor girl !" went on Ackerman, as the parson strode silently and sulkily on ; "how passionately fond she is of Meadows ! I don't believe anything would ever induce her to leave him !"

"Oh !" thought the parson, "you've been trying it, have you ? and have had the same answer as I had !"

"I suppose her mother's unkindness has driven her to seek refuge in her step-

father's love. Mrs. Meadows is a very cold woman I think I've heard you say!"

"Yes!" said Broderick, rather shortly.

"What a terrible thing it is for a warm-hearted person to be compelled to live with one of those cold lifeless creatures! It's maddening! It chills the blood in one's veins. How could Meadows have borne it all those years? I wonder he didn't desert her."

"He had his position to keep up."

"Yes; but what is position compared with the unutterable misery of living with such a woman? Didn't I know he was a man of strong feeling I should have imagined he was not affected by it. But seeing what he is I wonder he bore it so well."

"He used to be nearly mad sometimes; but I think the child kept him straight."

"Ah! dear child! she repays him for all his trouble. I never saw a sweeter girl."

"Bother him!" said the parson.

"And I doubt whether he wouldn't find it hard to part with her. And yet I suppose the time must come——"

"As to that," said the parson, interrupting, "there is reason to suppose the time is not so very far off; for I may tell you in confidence, Ackerman, that Thorn is in a position to marry again."

"Then is he divorced?"

"No; that poor soul is dead, and——"

"Dead!" The parson felt his companion start as though he had been shot.

"Dead, did you say?"

"Yes; that telegram brought the news. Had she been living I don't suppose Thorn would have gone, for he said he would never see her again."

"Dead!" muttered Ackerman to himself.

"Yes," said the parson; "it's strange how these things come about. I have

often sat thinking over Thorn's life, how full of promise it was when we both left college together: and how it was broken up. But now he can once more start afresh."

"He'll marry again, you think?"

"He certainly ought to in his position."

"Then he'll have children of his own, mayhap!"

"I should hope so, for the next heir is, I am afraid, a spendthrift."

"Ah! and the little girl will no longer be wanted!"

"She'll probably marry," said the parson, in an offhand way, but feeling very angry in his heart.

"Pray God she may marry well! It would crush her to live again with a cold-hearted creature!"

"Oh, Thorn will take care of that!" said the parson; "he's not likely to let her marry anyone he doesn't thoroughly know."

“Yes; amongst his friends there’ll surely be some one who will make her a good husband; eh, Broderick?” He touched his companion in the side with his elbow as he said this, to add significance. The parson was as nearly swearing inwardly as ever he was in his life.

“Confound him!” he thought. “His friends are of course somewhat old for such a girl,” he said, in a careless way; “but no doubt when she comes out a bit into society, we shall have plenty of young men ready to fall down and worship her.”

“I don’t see that age is an impediment if there’s sympathy. I mean of course within reasonable limits.”

“He’s coming to the point now,” thought the parson.

“The passion of love,” went on Ackerman, “though pleasant enough while it

lasts, is after all transient, and goes a very little way towards bringing us happiness ; don't you think so ?”

The parson, who was at this moment wrung by both love and jealousy, could hardly tell whether it brought happiness or misery. “I suppose so,” he answered, carelessly.

“What we want for everyday use is thorough sympathy, whether it be between husband and wife, or parent and child, or brother and sister, or friend and friend. When people marry from mere love—that is passion—the chances are perhaps about equal as to whether there is sympathy. Though, seeing how many unhappy marriages there are, I think I might say, unequal. It seems to me, therefore, that if a man can have resolution enough, he should try to shake off the blindness of mere love, and look at a woman from a sympathetic point of view before asking

her to be his wife. Don't you see, Broderick?"

"He has calmly calculated everything," thought the parson.

"This may sound cold-blooded at first, but when we consider how much depends on it, we can see how important it is."

"Of course."

"And it is only by divesting yourself of passion, if that be possible, that you can find out whether there is sympathy."

"He has evidently studied the question closely," thought the parson.

"In watching a girl grow up it must be difficult to know at what point one's ordinary feeling for her changed to love."

"What is he driving at?" thought the parson."

Ackerman was silent for a minute or

two, as though he expected some comment on his last sentence, but there was none.

“It would be a comfortable thing for that poor child to settle down near her adopted father at any rate, considering how very strongly she is attached to him.”

They had reached the front gate of the Vicarage. On any other occasion the parson would have asked his companion to come in and have a smoke; but he was now so thoroughly angry that he said very shortly, “I’ll wish you ‘good night,’ Ackerman. I have some little matters to attend to before I go to bed.”

“He evidently doesn’t like the subject mentioned,” said Ackerman to himself, as he walked away. “I’m sorry I said anything.”

The parson went to his own room and

fretted and fumed for some hours. It was some time before he could bring himself to what he would call a Christian spirit. He wrestled with his passions, and was determined that "the sun should not go down upon his wrath;" that in fact he would not go to bed till he had forgiven Ackerman.

Thornton Meadows little thought while he was pacing his hotel bedroom, speculating on his cousin's capability of overcoming all troubles by help of his Bible and his pipe, that Broderick was also passing a sleepless night battling with love, and envy, and jealousy. But the pipe was not allowed to be a consoler on this occasion. The parson felt that he had sinned grievously this evening in allowing his evil passions to get the better of him. He would have liked to have scourged himself, to have inflicted some bodily injury on himself by way of

punishment. Why shouldn't Ackerman have an equal chance with himself, he thought? Because Pet was the Squire's and his own especial property, and Ackerman was an outsider who had come in and interfered between them.

Thus he struggled with himself, one moment nearly overcoming, and the next going back to his selfish desires, as he called them. He tried to think of the poor dead woman, and to impress himself with a due sense of the awfulness connected with death; but his mind kept wandering away to the pretty girl who had been flitting about so happily all day in her white frock; and who since her refusal of a few days back had shown to him such a charming mixture of dignity and sweetness in her manner, as though anxious to let him see she understood the importance of the situation, and that she wanted his friendship

as much as ever. But the parson's bedroom and the Squire's hired apartment were not the only rooms where the lights burnt till daylight put them out.

Pet was in a state of extreme anxiety about her father. She knew how terrible a trial it would be to him to meet her mother again; and such fear had she of her mother's power, that like Keeley the coachman she dreaded lest the Squire should never come back safely; or else, what was almost as bad for him, that he might bring his wife back. She knew that he confided all his troubles to his cousin; and the parson looked so ill when he came in that she was sure there was something the matter. She sat up for hours trying to distract her thoughts by reading, and the blackbirds had commenced their song, and the other birds joined in chorus before she lay down to rest.

Mr. Ackerman also found reason for not going to bed at his usual hour ; but his time was fully occupied in turning out a good-sized tin box, which contained three paintings, some photographs, and a bundle of papers. The papers were all carefully read and sorted, some put in one parcel and some in another, and duly labelled. The paintings, which were in oils, were cleaned ; the photographs were examined ; and then all the contents of the box were replaced.

Mrs. Carey also, in the lodging-house, was not inclined to sleep. She had visions of herself in some of the beautiful dresses that Mrs. Meadows had been wont to wear. The Squire's wife had, like many women who suddenly attain affluence, dressed very handsomely indeed. There was a fine store of velvets and silks and satins, and laces, and gloves, and silk stockings, and fine linen, and

other little things which delight the feminine mind, besides some costly jewellery.

Mrs. Carey, who had never been able to get beyond cheap finery, longed to lay hands on some of these things. Now that she had full permission to regard them as her own, she wanted to take immediate possession, but she could not quite make up her mind to stay in the room alone with the corpse at midnight, where the travelling-packages were: so she contented herself with rifling the chest of drawers that stood in the adjoining dressing-room, which contained only articles of minor importance, which were to have been left behind under her care.

Thus, though five people were kept awake that night by the dead woman, there was not one person in the world to shed a tear for her.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS GREEN was scandalized. There was poor Mrs. Meadows dead and buried, and not a sign of a bit of black at Overton Hall. As the Widow Webb informed her patroness, the servants at the Hall considered they were done out of their mourning.

“Her own daughter, too ! and her husband, though they *were* separated !” Miss Green had exclaimed to her fellow gossips.

“How shocking !” echoed everyone.

“And that insolent Fanny Broderick has turned up again almost before the

poor woman's cold ; which just shows that what I said is true, and she means to catch her cousin if she can, and has come in good time to prevent anyone else," said Miss Green to her associates.

The Squire was resolute in not allowing what he called the mockery of mourning in his house. He told his stepdaughter to do as she liked regarding herself ; but her father's wishes were always hers.

The lady's-maid had ventured to point out to her young mistress that the servants were somewhat dissatisfied at not receiving what was always looked upon as a perquisite ; but Thornton Meadows said he was afraid they must put up with the disappointment, as he did not intend the house to go into mourning, and it would be too ridiculous to offer money instead, as it would make the event seem more like a cause for rejoicing. It was in such little matters as these that the

Squire sometimes made himself unpopular.

Miss Green's mind had been much troubled as to *where* Mrs. Meadows had died, and where she would be buried. Not that it would be any benefit to her to know; but the question arose in her mind when she found that she was not to be buried in the Overton vault; and when once any question arose in her mind she seldom rested till it was answered. In vain she had tried to get information from the parson. Mr. Broderick evaded her inquiries; but luck favoured the lady.

Mrs. Carey was much too proud of the fact that Mrs. Meadows of Overton Hall had died at her house, to let it go unrecorded. It would be an advertisement for her. So she sent announcements of the death "at 24 — Street, Grosvenor Square, the residence of her friend, Mrs. Carey," to three newspapers.

The *Times* did not reach Reedlands till it was two days old, as it was shared with relations who sent it on by post. Old Mr. Green was quite infirm and had long passed the period when he could read papers, and the ladies of the family cared only for the Court news, the divorce cases, and the births, marriages, and deaths, so the staleness of the paper mattered not to them. It was therefore not till the end of the week after the lady died that Miss Green discovered the whereabouts of her death. She cut out the advertisement and placed it in her purse. Mrs. Carey's advertisement attracted also the eyes of some one else, who happening to be in a public-house and taking up a noted daily penny paper, copied down the address of Mrs. Carey's "residence" into a greasy note-book, and forthwith went in search of it.

This was the evening of the day after

the funeral, and Mrs. Carey was resting from her labours after having ransacked all the drawers and boxes and the wardrobe, and appropriated everything she could find. She was sitting by the open window of her "first floor," in a black silk dress that had been her "dearest friend's," looking at the carriages pass. It was too dark to see who it was that had just come to the front door with a very pretentious double knock.

"Is Mrs. Carey in?"

"Yes, Sir. Have you come about the apartments?"

"Apartments? Oh, no, I'm a very old friend, tell her."

"She's up in the first floor, will you come up, Sir?"

The servant led the way.

"Why, Laura, is it really you?"

Mrs. Carey started.

"Don't you know me, Laura?"

“Why, Captain!”

“Yes, here I am, you see! let us have a light and see each other after all these years.”

Mrs. Carey lighted the gas.

“Dear me! you look just the same as when I left—younger in fact!”

“I can’t return the compliment.”

“No? Well I suppose I am a bit knocked about, and,” lowering his voice and looking towards the door as if the servant might be listening, “rather seedy—a little out at elbows, you know, for it’s been low water for some time past with me now. But you’re looking up! quite grand, eh? amongst the swells!”

“How did you find me?”

“How did I find you? Ah, never mind that!” winking at her. “I *have* found you, and that’s enough, and of course you’re very glad to see me, eh, Laura?”

Mrs. Carey did not answer, but sat playing with the heavy watchchain that had belonged to her friend.

“Yes, that’s a handsome bit of gold, Laura, really it is. Does it come from lodgings, or have we got a rich lover, eh, Laura?”

“You need not insult me,” she exclaimed grandly.

“Insult dear Laura! not for worlds. Why, most ladies would consider themselves insulted if one thought they hadn’t a lover. A pretty woman like you, Laura, would never be permitted to exist without some protecting arm. It is only ugly old frumps who are left desolate. Who is the happy man? Where do these pretty gewgaws come from?” He had placed himself by her side on the sofa and taken up the toys that hung from the chain.

“That’s not your business,” answered Mrs. Carey sharply.

“Isn’t it? Anything connected with dear Laura concerns me. And what’s become of poor Bella? is she here too?”

“No, Bella is dead, poor thing! you treated her most shamefully. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“Come, come, don’t say that! there were faults on both sides; but she had a devil of a temper you must own, Laura. If it hadn’t been for you I should have left her before; now shouldn’t I? You were always the peacemaker.”

“You stuck to her while there was a bit of her money to be got at, and then you left her to starve.”

“Come now, Laura, that’s putting it rather strong. And such a good little Laura as it always was! now don’t snatch away your hand like that, or I shall think the good little girl is changed in temper. O my! what pretty rings! why, it takes my breath away to see the flash of those

diamonds. I declare it's got so grand it doesn't like to sit by a seedy fellow like me. I'm not good enough for it now, and I remember when it would give me such a pretty little look and such a nice little kiss, eh, didn't it? Won't it give just one little kiss now—just a little one, for the sake of old times, eh?" dragging her face towards him.

"Get away," cried Mrs. Carey pettishly, struggling to be free from his embraces.

"Come now, you wouldn't refuse an old friend who has come to see you after all these years. Why, how many years ago is it? Ten? Dear me! I suppose it is! who'd have thought it? And you look younger and prettier than ever. And I? Well, I'm afraid Laura thinks I'm an old scarecrow, and she doesn't want to know me now. She doesn't like old friends who have come down in the world, eh?"

“Well, I’m sure I had no reason to like you.”

“But still you used to like me a little bit in the old days. But I wore a good coat and had a handsome face, and—well, that’s the way of the world! and the way of women especially. It’s enough to make a fellow say he’ll never believe in a woman again. Only, confound it, the little minxes are so devilish fascinating! One can’t help liking them. You must give me a kiss, Laura,” dragging her towards him. “I must have just one, or I shall not go to sleep to-night.”

Mrs. Carey submitted to the embrace with a semblance of unwillingness.

“Dear girl! it always was such a sweet girl. We should have made a capital couple, Laura, if I’d met you before I made that unlucky marriage. Don’t you think so.”

“No; I don’t believe you’d be a good

husband to any woman—not even if she was an angel.”

“It’s very severe, my little Laura is, on her poor friend, just because he’s poor.”

“Well, if you could desert Bella in that cruel way, you could do anything. I was obliged to keep her for some time.”

“Why, Bella was rich; she had the child’s money: that was always something certain. I have nothing in the world, but have to live on my wits. What’s become of the child? She must be grown up now.”

“She’s in good hands, and no thanks to you.”

“Oh, oh! Married?”

“I’m not going to tell you anything about her.”

“Oh, we have a secret, have we, as well as a lover?”

“Get out, you stupid.”

“No, no, we won’t call our old friend stupid. Does it think then it has got a little secret all to itself? Dear girl! suppose somebody else knows all about its little secret, eh?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean, little one, eh? What do I mean? Why, I mean to have another kiss from that sweet little mouth first. There! What a nice little girl it is! Does it want to know what I mean? Well, suppose I know a thing or two, eh? Edward’s not quite a fool yet, you know. Though he does wear a seedy coat, he knows something about polite society, and a certain Mrs. Meadows—you needn’t start.”

“You knew she was married, then?”

“Knew! of course I did. I know most things.”

“And did you ever write to her or see her?”

“No, Laura !” placing his hand on his heart, “I am not going to stoop to a woman I never loved. I was in want and she was rich, but I have yet some honour left. I never loved her, Laura—never !”

“Nonsense—you pretended to !”

“No, Laura. She loved me, poor thing, I believe she did, and that’s why I took up with her. But if I’d seen you first, Laura, she’d have had no chance.”

“Who told you all about it ?”

“Ah, never mind ! She’s gone now, and we must forget it all. So you closed her eyes, Laura ?”

“Yes, poor Bella ! I did all I could for her.”

“And I hope she showed her gratitude by leaving you everything ?”

“Yes ; there were only her clothes and things.”

“And a little jewellery, I suppose ?”

“Yes—a little.”

“And the funeral took place——?”

“Yesterday.”

“Dear me! and it’s all over. Well, poor thing, she was fortunate to marry Meadows.”

“Yes, she was, indeed. But you see poor Bella’s temper must have been queer as *he* couldn’t live with her either.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And he’s a nice-spoken gentleman, too.” .

“Is he? I never saw him. Have you ever been to Overton Hall?”

“No; Bella said it was a grand place, and lots of servants; and she’d always had a lady’s-maid, and a housekeeper too, and never went near the kitchen.”

“Very nice, too! That’s how you ought to live, Laura.”

“Oh, I shall never be so lucky as that, though I shouldn’t care to be shut up

down there. Bella said it was horrid dull."

"Yes?"

"She was always longing to come to London, and he wouldn't; and when they parted she went about like anything to make up."

"And did he write to her?"

"No; not that I know of, or the child either. He makes the child do just what he likes, Mr. Meadows does. He's rather strict in his manner like."

"Yes?"

"And he wouldn't even let her have a bit of her poor mother's jewellery, as I says to Mr. Meadows, 'Do let the dear girl have the jewellery,' and he said quite stern-like, 'Miss Meadows will not require any of it,' that's just what he said."

"Well, I think if she don't require it I do; and it's a shame she should be living in luxury and her poor father in want. I

say it's a shame, Laura, don't you?"

"Well, you see, as you left Bella, you must take the consequences."

"I don't know so much about that. At any rate the girl can't want that bit of money belonging to her, and it would be a godsend to me."

"But you know that can't be touched," said Mrs. Carey, with sudden energy. "You'd better not attempt it. I'll tell you what I'll do for you; I'll write to Mr. Meadows, as I'm friendly with him, and mention it. But I think you ought to wait a month or two, as it looks so bad just after the funeral and all."

"All very well to talk of waiting, Laura, when a fellow's almost starving, and there are his relations living in clover."

"You know you can't claim anything."

"I'm not so sure of that. I don't mean to starve at any rate."

"Well, look here, I'll lend you five

pounds, and you can pay me back if Mr. Meadows does anything."

"He'll have to come down pretty handsome, or I'll know the reason why."

"Well, wait a little until I can write. If you do anything now perhaps there'll be a flare-up, and we shan't get anything."

Mrs. Carey offered her seedy-looking visitor some supper, and before the meal was over another five-pound note had been extracted from her.

"I wonder how he found it all out," she said to herself when he had gone, unconscious that she had given him every item of news herself. She had, like a good many cunning people, for once outwitted herself with the announcement in the papers. "If it wasn't for that affair about the girl's money, I'd have snapped my fingers at him," she thought as she went to bed that night; "though, if he'll only leave things to me, we might both make something out of it."

CHAPTER XIV.

“ I CAN’T think what’s come to you, Thorn !” said Fanny Broderick, one day when they were walking in the grounds ; “ you’re grown so mopish and melancholy. I declare you’re worse now than when that dreadful woman was here. Whatever is the matter ?”

“ I don’t know that anything’s the matter. When one’s life is once broken, it’s difficult to patch it up again. One loses one’s freshness.”

“ Well, really I think you ought to consider yourself a lucky man. You might have been tied to that woman for

life, whereas here you are after six years free again; and still young—for you can't call a man middle-aged till he's forty—and not bad-looking; in fact, Thorn, I suppose most women would think you handsome."

"You don't then, eh?"

"Well, you see, you're only a cousin, and——"

"And not quite up to Charles's style, I suppose?"

"Get along with your nonsense, Thorn. No, really, as I said, young, good-looking, with this big place, though it's rather dull—and plenty of money, what more can you wish for?"

"Yes, it's strange, isn't it? that we mortals are never contented."

"Nay; I don't think it strange, but downright nonsensical. Look at me and Charlie. We've got to live on what wouldn't be pocket-money to you, and

we're only thankful to get as much. We don't grumble, and look as if we'd all the troubles of the world on our shoulders. We're determined to make the best of things. I declare, Thorn, it would do you good to come to poverty, then you'd have something to grumble about. You want a good shaking up. You're too sentimental."

"You're a funny girl, Fan! Nothing seems to put you out except Miss Green."

"Hateful woman! But I made Charlie pay her out with that sermon. I don't suppose she'll attack me again in a hurry. She'll be attacking you now, and putting down every woman you speak to as your future wife. Or perhaps old green eyes will look after you herself. I believe she flatters herself she's handsome; the wretched old scarecrow! Don't ask her here while I'm here."

"She's never asked at all now. She makes a call occasionally on Pet, and comes bothering after subscriptions, but she's neither lunched or dined here for the last twelvemonth."

"Then you may depend on it she rails against you more than ever. I wish somebody would marry her and take her out of the parish, for she's a thorn in the side to poor Bart. I'm sure I hope Charlie will never have such an old witch to put up with in his parish. He shan't at least while I'm alive, for I'd soon make it too hot for her."

"Poor Bart always gives in for the sake of peace and quietness, but I think Miss Green worries him a good deal."

"I'm sure she does. I think old Keziah would like to scratch her eyes out. You know Keziah must be an awful gossip, though she pretends she isn't, for

she seems to hear everything, and she was telling me the other day——”

“Well, Fanny, you must be a bit of a gossip yourself to know all this.”

“Me! Well, I must say I like to hear what’s going on, especially when such a funny old thing as Keziah tells you, for she’s a regular original. But I don’t call that being a gossip; at least, I’m not a backbiter like old green eyes; neither is Keziah for that matter. But the old woman always likes to have a chat with me, and I let her run on, and she always comes round to Miss Green somehow, whatever subject she starts with. She don’t love her any better than I do, that’s very clear. The last news is that old green eyes is going about saying it’s shameful you never put on black or put the servants in mourning. And she says you’re getting tired of educating Pet now and are going to have a governess, and

that there's something up between Pet and Mr. Ackerman."

"Whatever difference can it make to the woman whether such things are true or not? What an extraordinary thing it is, that looking for excitement in other people's affairs! Now I wonder whether if you were to dose such a woman with news and scandal she'd be satiated! Suppose all the families in the neighbourhood tell her all their histories past and present, and open all the cupboards with skeletons, and disclose all secrets. Would she be happier? Bah! it's sickening!"

"You know, Thorn, I *do* think it will be a good thing to have a governess for Pet, as you were saying the other day, because she's rather odd in her ways and notions."

"Does it strike you so?"

"Most decidedly it does. I think it

was such a very curious thing to let her be brought up by men only, because of course that woman did nothing towards teaching her in any way, or influencing her either. She's got such dreadfully broad ideas, that I declare she's always shocking me. And she doesn't take a bit of interest in all the little things that we women do. I was saying the other day how nice it would be if we could get up a dance or two when the weather's a little cooler, and was counting up the eligible men—and there are so few young ones about here—and she didn't seem to care a bit about it. She says the young men are such fools. That's a nice thing for a girl of her age to say! I suppose she means to have Ackerman, though I'm sure one would think he really was her grandfather from the way he treats her."

"But you don't call a fancy for young

men part of a girl's education, do you, Fan?"

"Well, you know what I mean, Thorn! You and Bart have made her so dreadfully clever that she hasn't got patience with us common mortals. She's learnt all those frightfully dry things that you men learn, and she's more like a man in her ideas than a woman. I'm sure she'll frighten all the men from asking her to marry."

"Well, if it pleases her to be single she's always got a home here, and me to take care of her."

"But, Thorn, you'll marry again of course. It will be downright wicked of you if you don't. And of course she's really no relation, so it's ridiculous to give up everything for her. Blood's thicker than water, you know, and *we* have more claim on you than she has——"

“Except that by adopting her I put her in the place of my own child.”

“Well, I hope you’ll really have some of your own some day, and Pet’s sure to get married, as she is so pretty ; unless she frightens everybody off, as she did young Merton the other day.”

“What was that?”

“Oh, I promised not to tell. She’ll pitch into me if I do.”

“I’ll keep your secret, Fan !”

“On your honour, Thorn !”

“Yes, if I possess that article.”

“Well, you know how that young fellow is always finding an excuse for coming over, and I’m sure it’s to look at her, and she doesn’t appreciate it a bit. We were lounging about trying to find a cool corner after lunch, and were on the corridor where the wicker seats are by the big window. Young Merton took up a gun that stood in the corner, and

pointing it out of window, said, 'There's a fine old blackbird, how I'd like a pop at him!' Pet rushed at him in a fury, snatched the gun out of his hands, and shrieked out, 'You brute! you deserve to be shot yourself.' She was perfectly white with rage. I really thought she was going to shoot him. I jumped up to interfere, but she laid the gun down and walked off."

"What did Merton say?"

"He said he thought it a good thing you didn't keep your guns loaded, considering what tempers some people had got."

"Was he very much offended, do you think?"

"He grumbled a bit to me, and said it was a 'jolly fuss' to make about a bird; but he seemed to get all right again, and waited for Pet to come back, but she didn't, and so he left. I believe she's

thrown away her chances there, for I am sure he was after her."

"It's no great loss; the fellow's very well in his way, but rather a fool."

"There you are, Thorn! You expect everyone to be dreadfully clever, or else you call them fools. He's a nice, gentlemanly young fellow, and I'm sure any girl might be proud of him."

"He wouldn't suit Pet if he shoots blackbirds."

"But she's so dreadfully sentimental about the birds; so are you. I call it ridiculous to make such a fuss."

"I don't think you're troubled with too much sentiment, Fan, eh? unless perhaps it is about Charlie."

"Of course, Thorn, that's the proper thing to be sentimental about. Now if Pet had been thinking of young Merton instead of the blackbird it would have been much more sensible. You expect a girl

to be a little bit sentimental about a nice young fellow like him; but there! she goes and wastes her sentiment on a black-bird, and loses a capital chance of marriage. I call it downright silly of her, and here you are encouraging her. The sooner she gets a governess the better, I say; it will knock some of the nonsense out of her."

"That's your opinion, is it, Fan?"

"Ay, and a very sensible opinion too, as any woman would tell you."

"And you think your friend Edith Courtley is the woman to 'knock out the nonsense,' eh?"

"Mind you, I don't say Edith's exactly the person I should choose. She's a dear girl——"

"But I don't want a girl, I want a middle-aged woman."

"Well, a woman then! I forget we're all growing so old. She's a couple of years or so older than I am, and——"

“ You are ?——”

“ Never mind, sir. We don't count after five and twenty. What I was going to say is that Edith's rather too much after your own style to be of use. She's bookish and melancholy, and reasons about things as you do; and I really think it's so stupid of people to be always reasoning and thinking, and inquiring after things. Why can't they take them as they find them? That's the only way to be comfortable and happy. She used to try it on me once, and was always asking what I thought on this, that, and the other, and I said, 'I'll tell you what it is, Edith, I don't think at all about it, because if I did there's no knowing where I should stop, and I'm very happy as I am.' And then she's always puzzling about religion, and wants to know if I've really thought out all I profess. Thought out indeed! Why, as I say, we learn it all

at school, and what more do we want?"

"What a happy-go-lucky girl you are, Fan!"

"Of course!" went on the voluble Fanny; "what's the good of moping and bothering over some stupid things that everybody's settled for you long ago? That's just what I say to Edith. She goes bothering about what this man says, and what that man says, and about her Carlyles, and Ruskins, and Spencers, and then looks as melancholy as a cat, and says life's a serious thing. Why, of course it is, I say, when you've only two hundred a year to marry on. But it's no good making yourself miserable about it. And of course it's dreadfully against her being like that, or if it wasn't for that I should say she'd suit you to perfection. Because after all she's such a lady. There! I'd give you my word for it she'd never do a shabby thing any more than you would; she's

just like you in that; so dreadfully particular not to hurt anyone's feelings, and wouldn't be spiteful for all the world. I tell her she beats me there, because if anyone does me a bad turn I must give it them back again, or I can't rest."

"I say, Fan, that isn't the proper sort of sentiment to come from a parson's wife."

"Oh, bother it! parson's wife or not I'm not going to be beaten down by anybody. I'm sure if I don't look sharp Charlie never will; for he's that meek and mild he'd soon be got over."

"You seem to have an admiration for 'meek and mild' people generally."

"Do I! I never noticed it. Well, I suppose it's because they're opposite to me, for you know they say in the books you always choose some one that's different from yourself."

"Yes, but you must take care where the difference lies."

“ The difference lies ? ”

“ Yes ; whether in disposition, or tastes, or ideas.”

“ There you are again ! I never trouble about it. I know whom I like and whom I don’t like, and that’s enough for me.”

“ And you like your friend Miss Courtley notwithstanding all the differences between you ? ”

“ Oh, we never have any differences ! I don’t think Edith and I ever quarrelled in our lives, and I’ve known her ever since I can remember. She was always one for her books, and I never was. But she was much worse for sweethearts than I. I’m sure she had no end, and I hadn’t. But of course I fixed on Charlie a good many years ago, and never cared for anyone after.”

“ Then she’s a lady who is much admired by men.”

“ She used to be, but she never thinks

of that sort of thing now. She's always talking about a woman's aim in life, and I tell her my aim is to take care of Charlie, and make both ends meet on two hundred a year; and that's about enough to do, I think."

"What had she proposed for herself?"

"She's dreadfully undecided. You see since her mother's death she's only got seventy-five pounds a year, and of course that's dreadful after the comfortable way they lived. I think Ada might give up her seventy-five to Edith, don't you? But she doesn't seem to see it. She says Edith can come and stay whenever she likes; but it isn't comfortable staying with a married sister, and means nursing the babies half the time, as I've found out myself; and I don't blame Edith for wanting to be independent."

"I think it is very wise of her."

"Well, what can she do on seventy-five

pounds a year. Mother says she might set up a school, as she's got all the furniture; but I think that's awful work, don't you?"

"Yes, it's arduous, certainly."

"Then it isn't nice to go and live with one's friends, because you feel you must be always doing and doing till you might as well be earning a salary. And then only fancy how awful it would be for her to go and live in a cheap boarding-house, which some people recommend. I'm sure when Bessy and I went up to London for a fortnight, and we stayed in a house where we paid thirty shillings a week, which is a great deal more than Edith can afford, it was something dreadful. I'm sure I never felt clean till I got home and had all my clothes hung on the line in the laundry yard to air. What I say is, this is just the thing for her, but I don't know whether it's best for Pet."

“ Suppose we risk that and try.”

“ Well, I’m sure I’d be glad for Edith’s sake if you would. I know she’d like to come; at any rate while she’s settling what she means to do, poor thing. She certainly is rather dreamy and mopy as I say; but then you’ll know whom you’ve got in the house, and after such a dreadful experience it’s something to have a *lady*, you know, Thorn, isn’t it?”

“ It is certainly.”

“ And if you *should* go and fall in love, Thorn, eh? Now you needn’t look like that, because you know it *is* necessary to warn you—if you *should*, you know, it’s safe enough. But I don’t think Edith is at all your style.”

“ At any rate Miss Green will no doubt decide the point for us.”

“ Ay! what fun! I’ll put Edith up to that. You know, Thorn, she’s an old flame of Bart’s; at least he admired Ada

most, but he used to think a great deal of both of them."

"Perhaps they'll make it up together now."

"Nay, they're too poor. At least, they'd be no poorer than I and Charlie; but Bart's more frightened of poverty than I am."

"You seem to be making pretty sure of Miss Courtley; but perhaps she won't care to come."

"I'm certain she will. She'll be only too glad of something of this sort turning up while she's so unsettled. I shall write to-day, for I know she's in a wretched state of uncertainty. She knows you as well as if she'd lived with you, because of course I'm always talking about you; and when I'm here I tell her everything in my letters. So she won't be like a stranger. You saw her, you know, when you were down with us; but it's a long

time ago, perhaps you've forgotten her."

"I remember the other sister better."

"How soon would you like her to come?"

"She might as well come as soon as she can make it convenient. It would be pleasanter for her while you're here. And you know, Fan, of course you must offer her a salary—something generous, you know."

"How much, Thorn?"

"Oh, you understand that sort of thing better than I do."

"Fifty pounds, shall I tell her?"

"That's dreadfully mean."

"Why, Thorn, look what Charlie and I have got to live on."

"But you don't want to make everybody else live on it, do you? Say a hundred at least; but I think it should be more."

"Say a hundred to begin with."

“Oh, that sounds like engaging a servant! You don’t expect a lady to be on her good behaviour in hope of reward. She’ll act conscientiously whatever her salary is, if she is really what you say. You see I want her to be like the mistress of the house, and to go out with Pet into society, and receive visitors here; and those pretty gowns you ladies wear in the evening cost money, don’t they?”

“I know mine don’t cost much. But then I make them myself.”

“Say a hundred and fifty.”

“Very well. All I can say is she’s very lucky. But I tell you what, Thorn, Pet will feel the difference after being mistress here so long, and having her own way in everything.”

“You can hardly say she has her own way, for she gives in to me in a moment.”

“It strikes me you give into her. Of course it will do her good to have a

little restraint, but I think she'll feel it."

"She's very pliable."

"Oh, is she? At any rate she's got a temper of her own, as she showed young Merton."

"That was excusable, considering her love for birds."

"You always do excuse her. I consider you really have petted that girl to a ridiculous degree. However, I hope Edith may make things right. I'm glad at any rate that you're going out a bit, and going to have people here. You keep the place a great deal too dull. Wouldn't I enjoy myself, if I had a big place like this and all your money! I'd have such lovely dances. Now you *will* have a dance before I go, *won't* you. There's no harm that I see, as you didn't go into mourning."

"Of course that makes no difference; I did not count her as my wife. But I

suppose, as she's Pet's mother, it wouldn't be conventional."

"But Pet didn't go into mourning."

"Well, we'll think about it when Miss Courtley's settled here. I had some idea of going abroad this autumn."

"Abroad?"

"Yes; Ackerman wants me to go with him. But I shall wait till I see that Pet gets on all right with Miss Courtley."

"Well, pray don't go before I leave, for we shall be three women alone in the house; and I can't bear a house without a man—the women always take to quarrelling."

"You'd have Bart to keep you in order."

"And we should have Keziah after us if we took Bart away altogether."

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN CARSTAIRS prided himself on possessing what he termed "a presence." He often found this presence of use to him; in fact he may be said to have made his living by it. But unfortunately time and drink had made some ravages in his personal appearance, and he could no longer secure victims, male and female, with the same facility he had once done.

When he first fascinated Mrs. Meadows, he was a tall, handsome man, with light hair and blue eyes, and face clean shaven all but the moustaches—moustaches that

were much admired by the ladies. It was remarked of him by one of his acquaintances that he looked an emperor at least as he strutted along Piccadilly or in the Park in search of adventure.

Women were certainly attracted to him, and men also : that is, some men and some women : for to others he was simply loathsome, with that swaggering, flashy, artificial manner which belongs to most men who trade on their appearance. There was only one defect in his figure : his waist and hips were of a shape more suited to a woman than a man ; though he seemed to take particular delight in showing them off with a tightly-buttoned frock-coat. This is a defect often observable in men of weak and bad character.

But a loafing, billiard-playing, drinking life soon tells upon a man. By the time he was thirty he had already commenced

to have fits of depression, when he would be an unshaven, blear-eyed, sallow-looking, miserable wretch for days together. Then he would recover, and start once more looking as well as ever.

When he presented himself to Mrs. Carey the day after Mrs. Meadows's funeral, he was merely a shadow of his former self. He seemed to have lost the power in his backbone by which he held himself so grandly in old days, and he tottered along like a man of eighty instead of forty. His eyes had sunk back in his head, and the eyelids fell heavily over. The eyeball was covered with a dingy yellow film streaked with red. The features were no longer clear cut, but puffy and ridgy. In fact his whole appearance very plainly told his history; that he had led a dissipated life, and had now sunk into an ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-conditioned creature, who snatched at any

sort of drink when it was to be got, and went without perforce when it was not within reach.

So low had he come that he had even contemplated reform, and when he was short of drink would tell a piteous tale of how he was striving to find honest work and could not. By this means he obtained small sums occasionally, when he would once more start at his old life.

A man who can pass from the bright sunshine of the morning into some billiard-playing den must be curiously dead to all good thought and feeling. But what was sunshine to Edward Carstairs except that at the present time it made his shabby clothes look all the shabbier?

But Captain Carstairs was looking up a bit now. That visit to Mrs. Carey was not by any means the last, neither were two five-pound notes the only ones ex-

tracted. Carstairs found out that Mrs. Carey had some reason for not wishing him to communicate with the Meadows family, and by this means he succeeded in obtaining from her all he wanted—at least, he got a new suit of clothes, a good supper every evening with the lady herself, and occasional half-sovereigns and sovereigns for pocket-money.

Mrs. Carey was beginning to feel she had paid very dearly for the booty she had cleared at her friend's death. She had counted on some pleasure in wearing all the beautiful clothes, and now her pleasure was spoilt by a continual fear of what Carstairs might do. If she forbade him to come to the house he would certainly go down to Overton, and that, for certain reasons, would be ruination to her. And if he would insist on coming he must be properly dressed, for he was a disgrace to such a respectable house.

Besides, there was one secret they held in common.

Therefore the Captain came out quite dazzlingly fresh once again. Instead of the paper shirt-collar which had for some time been the make-believe of clean linen, there were white shirts and fashionable cravats, and a jewelled pin. The new frock-coat was as tightly buttoned as ever, and a diamond ring had found its way from Mrs. Carey's third finger to the Captain's fourth. With good clothes and good feeding a touch of his old pride in himself came back, and while the novelty of his improved circumstances remained he resorted neither to gambling, billiard-playing, nor drink.

Mrs. Meadows had been wont to say of him that he was either an angel or a fiend; and if the word can be applied to one who has fallen so low, the Captain was certainly in an angelic mood, and

seemed likely to remain in it so long as Mrs. Carey supplied his wants. He had managed to establish himself on such a footing with her that he could go in and out of the house as he liked. It was, therefore, no uncommon thing for him to be seen walking airily up — Street, or jauntily stepping out of No. 24, with his hat the least bit on one side, his handkerchief with the coloured border just peeping from the breast pocket, and his frock-coat tightly buttoned up. His step had certainly lost its firmness, and if he looked at all like an emperor now it would be a very *blasé* emperor. Still there was the old jaunty air which catches some women so easily, and certainly caught Miss Sophia Green as she stood one afternoon in the early autumn looking up at the house.

She had just opened her purse to be sure of the number, for she fancied she

must be wrong when she saw a card in the fan-light over the hall-door on which was printed the word "Apartments."

"Can I have the honour of assisting you?" said the Captain, lifting his hat with one hand as he closed the door with the other. He never lost a chance of paying attention to ladies, especially ugly ones, for he found, as he said, there was more to be got out of them.

"Oh, thank you," said Miss Green, simpering, "you're really very kind. I was only wondering whether this was the house that a friend of mine died in; it gave this number in the newspaper, but I think there's a mistake, as I see this is a lodging-house!"

"A lady died here some weeks ago. Perhaps this *is* the house."

"My friend was named Meadows—Mrs. Meadows, of Overton Hall."

"Alas!" said the Captain, trying to

look sentimental, "it is only too true that Mrs. Meadows died in this house."

"You knew her, then?"

"Only too well." He heaved a deep sigh.

"She was a great friend of mine when she was at Overton, for I live close by, you know, at Reedlands; but I lost sight of her after that very unpleasant affair. You were probably aware she was separated from her husband?"

"I was, indeed! A most unfortunate business—most unfortunate. I think it killed her, I really do!"

"Poor thing! What a shame to have treated her so badly! But I always understood she went away of her own accord."

"I should not like to give an opinion on the subject. It's so dangerous to interfere between husband and wife. But I think it killed her!"

“Poor thing! I always stood up for her! I will say that. Mr. Meadows behaved disgracefully, I consider.”

“Do you think he is kind to that poor child?” asked the Captain, with apparent anxiety.

“Well, he simply makes a fool of her, I think, and so do most people. If she were his own it would be a different thing, but for a stepdaughter its ridiculous. Perhaps you are interested in her.”

“I am, indeed; she is related to me.”

“Is she? Dear me! I never heard poor Mrs. Meadows speak of any relations. She talked of a Mrs. Carey, who, I remember she said, lived in this street, and who invited her to come to stay with her.”

“Yes; Mrs. Carey is a most excellent woman, but scarcely a friend for Mrs. Meadows. I first introduced Mrs. Mea-

dows to her some years ago, when she was in want of a temporary home."

"Then Mrs. Carey lives in this house?"

"Yes; and poor Mrs. Meadows occupied a part of it just during the London season, you know, because she could count on being well served by Mrs. Carey. But it was merely as the mistress of a house where she had lodged that she knew Mrs. Carey. A most excellent little woman in her way! But I am keeping you here standing. May I not have the honour of accompanying you to your destination? It is not pleasant for a lady to be walking unprotected in the streets of London."

He made the grandest bow his weak backbone would allow as he said this, and lifted his hat.

Miss Sophia Green was quite overcome by his polite manner.

"Thank you!" simpered Miss Green,

"you are really too kind. I can hardly accept so much attention from a stranger."

"May I then be allowed to introduce myself? It will be a great pleasure to make the acquaintance of so charming and sensible lady as yourself." Miss Green had something of the appearance that is generally ascribed to ladies who are called "blue stockings," so the Captain thought it would be well to speak of sense as well as beauty.

"I am Captain Carstairs," he said, again bowing and lifting his hat, "and am entirely at your service."

"Carstairs? Then you must be related to Mrs. Meadows's first husband!"

"Yes; just so."

"Dear me, I wonder she never mentioned you!"

"Ah!" he said, sighing, "there are romances in some people's lives which are

locked up and kept out of sight; but they live in the memory still—in the memory always! Poor Bella!”

Sophia Green's lynx eyes brightened up at this. Here was something worth finding out. She always knew Isabella Meadows had a secret, she said to herself, and now perhaps she would discover it.

“I remember, now you speak of it, there was always something melancholy about Mrs. Meadows. But I put it down to the unpleasantness between her and her husband. Dear me! Poor thing, I feel more interested in her than ever now! I wanted to execute one more commission in Bond Street, and then I take a cab to Paddington Station.”

“It will give me great pleasure to escort you till you are safe in the train, if you will allow me to do so. It is really quite brave of you to venture out in the

streets alone. This is the shortest way to Bond Street."

"Oh! I'm never afraid to go out alone, like some of the girls; I'm used to it, for I look after the parish work at home, you know; and poor Mrs. Meadows, what a loss she was! she was such a help to me!"

"And her daughter? does she help in good works?"

"Well, I can't say she does. But I don't blame her. It's her father's fault. She's led by him in everything."

"Don't say her father!" said the Captain, with a sigh.

"Well, her stepfather, then."

"Ah! her father would do very differently."

"Did you know him, Captain Carstairs?"

"Pray don't ask me, my dear lady. It recalls bitter memories, memories of what

might have been; of a sweet angel now gone; of *her* life utterly blighted; of *my* life utterly wasted; of promises broken; of vows unfulfilled. Alas! that it should be so! I only hope the poor girl, alienated as she is from her family, and growing up amongst strangers, may resemble her dear mother in sweetness of disposition. Of her father I will say nothing."

"Really, Captain Carstairs, you interest me very much about Miss Meadows. I was always so extremely fond of my dear friend Isabella, that I am naturally curious about her family. I fancied there were perhaps quarrels amongst them, as she never mentioned any member of the family at all; and I noticed that her daughter even did not seem to be very fond of her. I have often wondered about it all. She told me she had been rich, but by the extravagance of her

husband she was reduced to poverty; for, you know, when she was first introduced into our neighbourhood she was merely acting as companion to Miss Arabella Meadows."

"Yes; unfortunately I was away from England at that time."

"And, poor thing, she was afraid when she married Mr. Meadows that she'd not be received in the county, because of her previous position in the household——"

"It wrings my heart to think of her suffering."

"But *I* took her up at once, you know, and secured her position for her."

"How really kind of you! I felt sure the moment I beheld you that you were one of the good angels upon earth. May I have the supreme honour of knowing your name, that I may always cherish it in grateful remembrance for your kindness to poor dear Bella?"

“Oh, certainly! I am Miss Green of Reedlands.”

“I hope, Miss Green, this may not be the last time I shall have the pleasure of seeing you. I can assure you that I shall ever esteem it one of the few fortunate events of my life (for I am an unlucky man, Miss Green) that I have met a lady, at once so charming and so wise, who has been a dear friend to poor Bella. I wish I had it in my power to show my gratitude for your kindness to her at a period when she stood in need of a friend. But I am poor, very poor; by my own fault, some people say: by misfortune, I hope you will believe; and I can only offer you my poor services, such as they are. Should you require any little commissions executed I shall be most happy to do anything you may command; or should you at any time want an escort when you come up to town—and really you should

not go about unprotected ; you certainly should not—I shall be more than supremely proud to be your humble servant.”

“ You are very kind,” said Miss Green, who was quite elated with so much flattery. It was quite a new experience for her. By the time she reached Bond Street her cheeks were flushed with pride ; and she had begun to fancy herself the lovely creature that the Captain led her to believe she was. She was persuaded to go into a confectioner’s and take some delicate refreshment ; and then this curiously ill-matched couple drove up Bond Street in a hansom, attracting attention by reason of the incongruity of their appearance. The smart, rakish-looking man had certainly, in appearance, nothing in common with the dowdy-looking faded woman, whatever may have been their similarity in character.

There was at any rate a bond of sympathy between them, and each was ready to sacrifice the truth and all else to gain the desired object; only in the lady's case it was gossip, and in the man's gold.

“Really, Miss Green,” said the Captain, as he stood on the platform at the Paddington Terminus, holding the lady's parcels and bag, “I shall count this day an uncommonly lucky one—for not only have I made your charming acquaintance—most charming, believe me!—but I shall now be in a position to hear something of the young lady in whom I am so deeply interested—since you have promised you will do me the honour to write to me sometimes. But, as I said before, pray don't mention me at present in that quarter. The time has not come for it yet. Some day, ah, when! I may perhaps recover my position in society. Until

then I should not like to wound the feelings of the dear girl; especially so soon after her mother's death."

"As to that," said Miss Green, who had by this time become tolerably familiar with her companion, for he had made the most of the opportunity their proximity in the cab afforded to whisper compliments in her ear, "I don't see that we need consider her feelings so very much. She hasn't shown much, for she's never worn a bit of mourning——"

"No mourning! Outrageous!"

"And worse than all, there's going to be a party there soon — positively a dance!"

"Dancing six weeks after her mother's death! Atrocious! Awful! That dear sainted creature! You'll not go, of course, Miss Green."

"I shouldn't think of countenancing such a thing."

“It breaks my heart to think of the poor girl being brought up in such a dreadful way.”

“Oh! you mustn’t blame her. It’s all her father’s doing.”

“Not *father*, Miss Green! Remember that! Her father never would, as I said before. Oh, that I could interfere!”

“I’m sure I should if I were you, considering you are really related to her.”

“Ah, but think of my poverty, dear Miss Green. I know I have a right to take her under my own care; but might is right in this world, and those who have money have all the power. I could not wish her to share my poverty, poor child.”

“But she ought not to be living in luxury if you, her own blood relation, are in want.”

“So everyone says; but I don’t want

to deprive her of anything. I have only her welfare at heart. Some day, Miss Green, you will know all. But till then pray keep my secret. And now, dear lady, I will say '*Adieu!*' I will also say '*Au revoir,*' for I hope to see your charming face again. Pray step in, and I will hand you these after."

"Thank you," she said, taking the parcels. "I am very pleased to have met you, and I hope we may meet again. I am really quite interested in all you have told me."

The Captain stood dutifully at the door till the train started, when he lifted his hat and kissed just the tips of his fingers to her.

"Delightful man!" she said to herself. "I wonder what relation he is to her! There's some mystery about it; but I'll find it out."

"I must have a 'b. and s.' after that,"

said the Captain to himself, as he walked across to the refreshment-bar at the station. "What an appalling old hag she is! But I'll make her useful, by Jove, I will! Must keep it dark from the Carey though!"

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS GREEN was fully occupied. Her lynx-like eyes seemed to sparkle more brightly than ever from their cavernous depths. She was thoroughly enjoying herself. Not only was she overflowing with gossip, but she had a little romance all to herself. It was evident, she thought, that Captain Carstairs had fallen in love with her.

When we see faded single women we like to imagine that at some time in their lives they have known what love is. The spinsters themselves also like to build up a little romance on the small love affairs of

their youth ; so that what may have been at the time a mere commonplace affair is, with the halo of twenty or thirty years surrounding it, magnified into a romantic history for the benefit of nieces and nephews, who sigh sentimentally as they recount the tale how Aunt Angelina missed her Edwin. But Miss Green had no such little incident in her life. She was the eldest of a large family, and had always been a plain and uninteresting woman. She had no sympathy with her own people, and preferred parish duties to home affections. She was unlovely and ungracious even in youth ; and time had sharpened her defects rather than toned them down.

No one had ever made any pretence of admiring her. With the former Vicar of Overton she had often been in open war ; since he was a man who was determined to rule others, and she was a

woman who determined not to be ruled. But Mr. Broderick, finding her installed as the general parish woman when he went to Overton, and finding also that she interpreted what was mere courtesy on his part as something else, preferred to give in to her rather than be brought into the contact which disputes would entail. She had therefore taken undue advantage of Bart Broderick, and endeavoured as far as she could to raise in him an admiration for her person and character. But how little she succeeded we already know.

She had now for some time regarded the parson as beyond her reach : and “all through that horrid Thornton Meadows, and that insolent Fanny Broderick,” she told herself ; so she was more sour than ever. But what was Parson Broderick to her ? she argued. What was he—a mere plodding clergyman—by the side of

the brilliant and witty Captain Carstairs?

Miss Green's wildest dreams were realised. She was adored; she was worshipped by a man of the world—a man who according to his own account had found women ready to be his slaves. She could bring him to her feet at any time. Not that she meant to do it exactly. He was poor, and her allowance was not enough to marry on. The family was so large that even at her father's death she would have but a small income. But she could keep the Captain as a hanger-on and an ornamental and useful friend. For notwithstanding his bloodshot eyes and ridgy skin, she thought him a handsome man. Suppose she were to bring him boldly to the village, and defy the Meadows family and that impudent Fanny Broderick! But no; she must first find out the family secrets. There was something mysterious about the whole affair,

and she meant to know it. She managed to discover that there were several little commissions she wanted executed in town which gave her an opportunity of writing to the Captain. In reply she received a letter full of complimentary phrases, mixed up with expressions of anxiety about "that poor girl at Overton Hall."

In the midst of her little romance she still carried on a sort of guerilla warfare with Fanny Broderick; and had commenced hostilities with Miss Courtley. The last-named lady always spoke of Miss Green with contemptuous pity, and treated her with pitying contempt.

"Poor thing!" she would say when Fanny was angrily declaiming against her; "she can't help it; she doesn't know better, and is never likely to learn, because she shuts herself up from receiving good impressions."

Fanny, who knew she had a willing

listener in Keziah when she wanted to pour out her woes about Miss Green, always repeated what Miss Courtley, or the Squire, or Pet had to say on the subject; and such repetition never lost by the time it reached Miss Green herself.

“Insolent woman! a mere drudge to talk like that!” said Miss Green, when she heard Miss Courtley’s opinion of her.

Thus the warfare was kept up, for old Keziah found a pleasure which her master would have characterised as most unchristian, in letting Miss Green know what other people said of her. The Squire laughed at these discussions on “old green-eyes,” as Fanny called her, and said that it wasn’t worth while to take notice of anything Miss Green said.

“Well, Thorn,” said Fanny one day when the subject was being discussed, “if we don’t ask her to the dance, she’ll

blacken all our characters like anything."

"I think she has done that already," said the Squire, laughing. "I don't see why we should ask her. It's now more than a twelvemonth since she came by invitation; and it's really very hypocritical to ask a person whom we all dislike."

"But you must not offend people you dislike, Thorn, especially when they can be such enemies as that horrid old thing. This is a special party, and it's ages since there was a large party here, and of course she'll expect an invitation. Now do take my advice, and don't make an enemy of her. I'm sure you can't hate her worse than I do; but it's better to put up with her for an evening than have her going about everywhere blackening us all."

"It seems ridiculous to ask an old woman like that to a dance unless she chaperons some one else."

“Well, of course she chaperons her younger sister.”

“There’s little difference in their ages, so there’s no need of that. You can ask the two younger sisters without Sophia, if you like.”

“Thorn! you’ll never hear the end of it if you do. She’ll play us some diabolical trick, I’m sure she will.”

“Nonsense, Fan! You seem to think she has the power of Satan himself.”

“Well, I’m sure Satan never interfered so much with me as she does; for I never have anything to do with him out of church.”

“That’s a nice speech for a parson’s wife. One would think the devil was only to be found in church.”

“You know what I mean, Thorn. You are so aggravating! I mean I don’t think anything about him except when he comes in the lessons. He doesn’t go about telling

lies of me as that horrid old green-eyes does. I declare I never had such dreadful things said of me in my life before as she says!"

"Well, never mind! You'll go back to Lincolnshire soon after the party, and your Charlie will save you from Miss Green's clutches. So let her say what she likes! I don't mean to have her here."

"Well, you must take the consequences, Thorn! I declare I think it would be fun to see the ugly old thing looking on with envious eyes while we're all dancing and she couldn't get a partner. For of course no one would ever ask her to dance. Wouldn't it be fun, Edith?"

"I should hardly think she would accept the invitation if it were given," said Miss Courtley, "for it would probably be fatiguing to a woman at her time of life to have to sit for hours and watch the dancing."

“Oh, you funny Edith! You don’t know her yet! Not want to come! Why, if she was a hundred years old she’d want to come just to watch people, and try and hear what they said, and make scandal out of it. At her time of life! Why, Edith, I can assure you she thinks she’s a young woman, and a handsome one too.”

“You’re imaginative, Fanny! I dare say the poor woman would rather be in her bed than sitting up watching us.”

“Well, we’ll not give her the chance of choosing which she’ll do on this occasion,” said the Squire, “and about the younger sisters you can do as you like. You three ladies must settle it between you.”

So Miss Green was not invited to the party at Overton Hall, which was fixed for the third week in September. The Squire had arranged to start with Mr. Ackerman on their little trip almost immediately after the party. He had waited till he

felt quite secure in leaving his beloved stepdaughter in charge of Miss Courtley, and a very short time sufficed to show him that the lady was all he could wish in every way.

Meanwhile Pet was very unhappy. She had been thrown a great deal into Fanny Broderick's society till Miss Courtley came, and then the three were generally together. She saw that some change had taken place in her father's conduct towards her, and she allowed herself to be influenced by Fanny as to the reason of the change.

"You know, Pet," said Fanny, "you mustn't be disappointed if you're not made quite so much of, though of course you'll always count like one of the family. But you know Cousin Thorn *must* marry again, he really *must*, as we all tell him, because Overton's entailed, you know, and if there are no children it will go to such a

dreadful man. Now if he'd been a nice man, you know, it would have done very well to get up a match between you and him; but he's a horrid wretch I've heard, and dreadfully in debt. So Thorn must marry again and have children; and that will be very nice for you after all, won't it? because they'll be like little brothers and sisters, and will make the house so lively, for it's really very dull."

And Pet felt she was a very wicked girl, for she didn't want the little brothers and sisters she told herself; in fact, if she had spoken out the truth she would have said she was quite sure she would be jealous of the wife and the children too. But she only said very meekly, "Of course he ought to marry."

"Yes," said Fanny, "and of course you'll marry soon, you know, unless you go and fall in love with some one poor, as I did, and have to wait ages and

ages. But don't you like young Merton just a little bit, Pet, though you *were* so very cross to him?"

"No, I can't bear him. I don't like men. I don't want to marry."

"Now that is a story, Pet! You know you always get the men all round you and try to please them. There's Mr. Ackerman! Look how he worships you! But he's an old fogey. I must say at *my* age even I shouldn't care for him. And there's Bart ready to do anything for you! But you mustn't take him because I consider he belongs to Edith; and besides he's too old for you. But I'm sure you could pick and choose where you like; and if you do choose anyone poor I believe Thorn will make handsome settlements, on you as if you were his own; and very lucky you are too! for, as I say, here are we his own relations who might be thought of before strangers, though he's

been kind enough to me, I will say."

"Whom do you think papa will marry?"

"Well, it's early days yet to talk about it, because your mother's only been dead two months; but of course it isn't as though he'd been living with her. I say he ought to lose no time in looking about, so that he can marry directly the year's up; for of course he's not so very young now."

"He's only thirty-six. That isn't very old for a man."

"No; but of course his life is rather miserable now. You can see he wants something to rouse him up. I'm so glad he's going abroad with Mr. Ackerman. I can't think why he's moped at home here in this dull place when he's got all that money, and might have been enjoying himself in London and Paris, and all those jolly places where there's so much to be seen."

“But we haven’t been dull here.”

“Perhaps *you* haven’t because you’re young. And of course he’s sacrificed himself to educate you, which as I tell him was such a stupid thing to do when a governess could have managed ever so much better, and he might have been enjoying himself.”

“But do you think he’s dreadfully unhappy?”

“Well, I really think he’s bored for want of change and society. He’s shut up so much.”

“But there’s Cousin Bart and Mr. Ackerman; he always seems happy with them.”

“Yes; but a gentleman in Thorn’s position ought to see more of life. He doesn’t care to give parties and go amongst his neighbours and hunt, as our country gentleman do——”

“Oh, papa hates killing animals.”

“Yes, but gentlemen always hunt or shoot, or both, according to the part they live in. Those are the regular things for a country gentleman; and of course it’s sociable and nice, and fills up the time. That’s one of Thorn’s affectations about not killing anything, because of course you must kill foxes; and if you didn’t kill game there’d be none to eat.”

“But you needn’t do it for amusement.”

“Then whatever are gentlemen to do to pass the time?”

“Papa has never found too much time on his hands. He’s got his books and——”

“Books! That’s just what gives him all these odd notions and makes him so mooney. There’s nothing so bad as everlastingly sitting poring over books——”

“But he doesn’t always sit over books. We go out riding, and in fine weather we go botanizing and——”

“Botanizing! What’s the good of that? A flower’s very pretty, but I don’t see the good of pulling it all to pieces and finding out all about it? I’m contented with it as I see it.”

“But then papa isn’t, you know. He likes to find out about everything. He hasn’t had time to do half the things we’ve proposed to do. We were beginning on the birds this summer, but——”

“Fancy bothering yourselves about the sparrows and small birds! It’s very nice to hear them singing, but I can’t for the life of me see the good of trying to find out what bird’s note this is, and what bird’s note that is, and whether this is a female blackbird or a song thrush, or whether that is a female robin or a hedge sparrow. I declare the way you rush to the window when you see some ridiculous bird one would think the Queen of England was in the garden, and it’s only a bird after

all. I call you downright silly about little things of that sort, Pet; and the way you snubbed young Merton about the blackbird was perfectly insane of you; for of course you had a chance there; as anyone might see."

"I tell you I hate him," said Pet, fiercely; "and I wouldn't marry him for anything."

"Well, you might as well be civil to him for Thorn's sake, for I declare your behaviour was enough to offend all the family; and I believe Thorn is rather inclined to be sweet on Clara Merton. She's an awfully pretty girl—don't you think so?"

"I've never thought about it," said Pet, indifferently.

"It would be a very suitable match, though she is rather young; but she'd be a nice companion for you. But, oh! Pet, what fun it would be if you married

George Merton, and Thorn married Clara ! Whatever relation would you all be to one another ? It would be a regular family puzzle."

Pet was biting her lips in the effort to restrain herself from crying. She felt as though she could have screamed out.

"But if you don't mean to have him, you know, Pet, you might as well be as agreeable as possible for Thorn's sake. It would do him good to knock about with the Mertons a bit. I'm rather looking forward to the party, to see if he pays much attention to Clara. Of course I don't suppose he'll say anything to her till he comes home from abroad, but if he cares about her we shall soon see. You'll write and tell me directly you hear of the engagement, won't you ?"

"Yes," said Pet, feebly.

"I shall be so glad to hear of it, for I can't bear to see Cousin Thorn so mopey

and miserable. I can't understand what makes him like it. He seems worse than when—when you know you used all to be so miserable with *her*. I thought when she went he seemed to cheer up so. Don't you remember that awfully jolly time we had at Brighton? I declare I never enjoyed myself so much in my life, only of course I should have liked Charlie to be there. But we *were* jolly, weren't we? and what a lot of lovely things Thorn did give me. He seemed all right when I left, too, at the beginning of the year, but now he looks wretched—down-right wretched—and of course I thought that what happened in the summer—you know what I mean—I don't want to hurt your feelings, Pet, but it was a happy release, wasn't it?"

Pet began to cry.

"There now, darling, don't cry!" I would never have said it if I thought

you'd have minded ; but you never used to mind what I said about her. Don't cry ! I'm so sorry, dear ! I am really !”

Poor Pet seemed unable to stop crying.

“Pet, darling ! Don't ! You'll make your face such a sight, and then Thorn will pitch into me and say I've been worrying you. Do leave off, Pet ! I never meant it, I really didn't !”

Pet still sobbed as though her heart would break.

“Pet, dear ! for my sake, do be quiet. Thorn will be so vexed. And, you know, I hadn't the least idea you felt her death, I hadn't truly. I wouldn't have said an unkind word for the world. Do kiss me, and tell me you've forgiven me, or I shall be quite miserable. What a great stupid I am to have said it !”

Pet put out her hand to take Fanny's, to show that she was not offended, but

she could not be persuaded to take her handkerchief from her face.

“Do let me go away,” she cried, “I shall get better by myself.”

“No, no,” said Fanny, “I must cheer you up again as I’ve made you so miserable.”

“Do let me go,” said Pet, wrenching her hand away, and rushing off to her room.

Pet did not appear again that day. At dinner she sent an excuse that she was suffering from head-ache, and the Squire turned to Miss Courtley to inquire what was the cause.

“Fanny tells me that she inadvertently mentioned her mother’s death, which seemed to upset her!”

“Oh!” said the Squire, looking somewhat incredulous.

“Yes; you know, Thorn, I was having a bit of a chat with her about other

things in general, and I happened to say—I forget how it came in—that her mother's death was a good thing; something of that sort; I can't tell exactly the words; but you know we always thought she never had any affection for her mother, and I'm sure I've mentioned her in that sort of way over and over again, ever since her death; and I never thought she'd break out like that. But she burst into tears, and I said everything in the world I could think of to make up; but I couldn't stop her."

"She's of rather a nervous temperament," said Miss Courtley, "and is exceedingly sensitive on some subjects."

"But not about her mother," said Fanny, "she doesn't love her any better than I did, I think."

"Perhaps she was not feeling well at the time," suggested Miss Courtley. "One can bear at one moment what

might be intolerable at another. I have noticed that she is variable in mood ; sometimes very gay and sometimes so sad ; don't you think so, Mr. Meadows ?”

“ Perhaps she is.”

“ Well, she used to be jolly enough,” said Fanny ; “ only lately she's got into Thorn's mopey ways. It's my opinion she sticks too much to books.”

“ You see books were always your enemies, Fanny,” said Miss Courtley.

The Squire did not look happy at dinner time, and after the meal was finished he left the ladies to themselves, and shut himself up in his study.

When Fanny and Miss Courtley went to say “ good night ” to him he asked whether they had been to see Pet, and if she were better.

“ Oh, yes !” said Fanny, “ I think she'll be all right now. She kissed me and made it up, and seemed so sorry about it,

and said she hoped I hadn't worried."

"Yes, poor child!" said Miss Courtley, "she seemed quite cut up about it, and apologised as though she had given offence."

When the ladies had retired to their rooms, the Squire went up-stairs and softly opened the door of Pet's room and whispered, "Pet."

"Yes, papa!" said Pet in a moment.

"What is the matter, darling?"

"Oh, nothing! except a fit of temper, papa!"

"Temper, Pet?" he said, sitting down by the side of the bed. "Why, what has put my little girl in a temper?"

"Fanny said a lot of dreadful things, and I couldn't bear them; but—oh, papa! I know it's all true, only I can't—I can't—bear it—but I'll try to."

The pretty eyelids that were already so inflamed were again being rubbed with the

handkerchief. The child had cried herself into a thoroughly weak condition, and now she was longing to pour out all the troubles which she had been heroically keeping to herself for some weeks past.

“Pet, darling! don’t cry like this. My child! my dear little girl! Come here and tell me all about it!”

He lifted her up and sat down on the side of the bed, holding her in his arms and wiping away her tears with his handkerchief.

“My dear little Pet! you’ll make papa wretched if you cry like this.”

“But Fanny says you are wretched,” sobbed out Pet.

✓ “I wretched! What nonsense! I can’t be wretched while I have such a dear, good, little girl.”

“But she says—she says it was a great mistake—oh, dear me! I’m sure it was—I know it was——”

“What, darling?”

“That you’ve spent so much time on me instead of enjoying yourself. Oh, papa, dear! I know she’s right, but I *was* so happy, and I never thought about you—and—and I know—you’ve been miserable all the time.”

“My darling girl!” he said pressing her more closely to him, “I never could have lived all those weary years without you. It was you who saved me from doing something desperate. I took a delight in teaching you, and you’ve more than repaid me for the trouble, little one.”

“I wish I could have kept little, papa. It’s so dreadful to grow up. I wish that time had never, never ended.”

“Why should it end, Pet? You are still my pupil, aren’t you?”

“But it’s all so different now. But it’s quite right, and it’s wicked of me to grumble; and Fanny’s very cruel

sometimes, but she's quite right, I'm sure she is, and, oh ! I must try——"

Here she broke down again.

"Now, Pet, dear ! you must not cry. You'll make yourself so ill. Leave off crying, darling, and tell me every bit about it. What is it that's so different ?"

"Why, I used to have your love all to myself, didn't I, papa ? And I know it's very greedy of me, but I *did* like it ——"

"Did you ?" he said, kissing her tear-stained face ; his heart beating fast, and his frame trembling.

"And now—now—you'll love some one else—and——"

"Who else am I going to love, Pet ?"

"Why, Clara Merton—or somebody of that sort."

"You silly child ! Is this some of the nonsense Fanny's been putting into your head ?"

"But of course you *must* marry, papa !

everybody says so as well as Fanny."

"And Fanny has chosen Clara Merton for me, has she?"

"She says it would be a good match; and she says you wouldn't look so miserable if you married."

"I didn't know that I was looking so miserable. Do you think I do, Pet?"

"Sometimes, papa; lately;" said Pet, tearfully; "but *are* you really miserable? You used to tell me everything once, just as if I were a little woman, you know, when I was quite a girl; and now I'm really growing up—oh, I wish I weren't—you don't talk to me as you used. Do you love me just the same—just the very same as you did when I was little?"

"Yes, darling, a great deal more."

"Then why won't you let me be the same to you? When I see you looking so sad—and sometimes when you jump up in that restless way you've done lately,

and go out of the room, I do so long to come after you and ask you what's the matter. Oh dear! it was so nice when you used to whistle for me and Laddie whenever you wanted us, and now I'm too big to whistle to—and Laddie and I have to console one another, and once we used to console you, didn't we?"

"Yes, child, and so you do still."

"Then what *is* the matter, papa?"

"I think I may be a trifle out of health; but this trip with Ackerman will probably set me right."

"I do hope so, papa! And then shall we be happy again as we used to?"

"Why shouldn't we?"

"And you won't marry yet, will you?"

"Don't you want me to?"

"Not yet," she whispered, hiding her face in his neck. "I'll try to bear it in time; but if—if you *should* marry now, I

should be *so* jealous. It's very wicked, but I can't help it."

"My dear little girl!" he said, lifting up her face and kissing it; "I love you more than anything else in the world—more than you can understand."

"Dear papa!" she whispered, throwing her arms round him and kissing him fervently.

"Good night, child, good night," he said, hurriedly moving away; and taking up his candlestick, he left the room.

"What a brute I am!" he said to himself, as he walked across to his room, "I've made matters ten times worse. I might have known I couldn't stand it. Whatever can I do? It will kill her if I leave her: and it will kill me to remain with her. I wish I could take things as old Bart does."

His hands trembled as he undressed himself, and when he caught sight of his

face in the glass he was astonished at its pallor.

“What a mistake it has all been from beginning to end!” he said, as he wound up his watch vigorously and snapped the mainspring. “Bother it! but I wouldn’t undo it. I’d go through a thousand purgatories rather than give her up. But I *must* give her up. Poor child! she little thinks I am much more anxious to keep her from marrying than she can be to keep me.”

Pet was very much consoled by the Squire’s visit, but could not understand why he left so abruptly. She felt that her trouble was at an end, and that she was triumphant. There was no fear of her father marrying anyone yet, she thought, that was certain; for had he not shown how much he loved her. He was evidently out of health. That accounted for his strangeness and restlessness lately;

and of course that accounted also for Miss Courtley's coming : for it would give him an opportunity of going away. He hadn't liked to tell her of feeling ill, in case she should be anxious. Dear papa ! how good of him ! Perhaps when he came back everything would be right again ; and they would be happy, and she needn't be agreeable to that horrid George Merton, for it was all nonsense about Clara Merton, and papa had laughed at it. But wasn't it dreadfully selfish of her to want to keep him all to herself ? Everyone was saying he ought to be married, and of course he ought. Oh, dear ! what a tiresome thing it was that people must get married in this world ! Why couldn't they be happy without ?

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.





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